



Between

Angie Abdou

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Vero and her husband Shane have moved out of the sweet suite above his parents' garage and found themselves smack in the middle of adulthood?two kids, two cars, two jobs. They are not coping well. In response to their looming domestic breakdown, Vero and Shane get live-in help with their sons?a woman from the Philippines named Ligaya (which means happiness), whom the boys call LiLi. Vero justifies LiLi's role in their home by insisting that she is part of their family, and she goes to great lengths in order to ease her conscience. But differences persist; Vero grapples with her overextended role as a mother and struggles to keep her marriage passionate, while LiLi silently bears the burden of a secret she left behind at home.

Between offers readers an intriguing, searing portrait of two women from two different cultures. At the same time, it satirizes contemporary love, marriage, and parenthood by exposing the sense of entitlement and superiority at the heart of upper-middle-class North American existence through a ubiquitous presence in it: the foreign nanny. Angie Abdou comically and tragically tackles the issue of international nannies by providing a window on motherhood where it is tangled up with class, career, labour, and desire

Between Details

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From Reader Review Between for online ebook

Alexis says

Very, very impressed by this book. Angie Abdou tackles depression, parenthood, motherhood and Filipina nannies in this book. She gives us the perspective of both the North American mother/employer and the Filipina nanny, which makes this book balanced and unique. The plot was unexpected and twisted and turned. I spent two weeks in the Philippines on a study tour to take a bunch of Canadian farmers to meet Filipino farmers. We spent a lot of time talking to Filipinos in their homes and I've been very interested in the culture and the people ever since. I'm not Filipino, but I feel that Abdou captured some of the cultural realities of the Philippines in this book.

Nice work.

Side note- When reading part of this book, I ran out of the bedroom and yelled to my boyfriend, "My book has gone crazy." That's how little I expected the plot twist.

I agree with all the writers who say this book is gutsy and brave.

Pragya Esh says

I usually don't rate books I whipped through in 2 days so poorly, but I was so disappointed with this book.

What is described as an exploration of two characters really ends up as an analysis of one: Vera, the upper-middle-class white woman with liberal guilt over hiring a Philipino nanny. Abdou's characterization of Lingaya is dismally thin, with what we know about "the nanny" serving only to show us the limits of Vera's understanding. In oyerher words, she only exists to uncover Vera.

Not only was I disappointed in how the novel uses a racialized woman to explain the white woman, but the story line itself is also flimsy - basically, I didn't buy it.

Ann Douglas says

A gutsy and intriguing look at the lives of two women -- a nanny and her employer -- who find themselves grappling with the constraints of their lives.

A compelling, character-rich story.

[Review based on an Advance Reading Copy supplied by the publisher, Arsenal Pulp Press]

Steven Buechler says

Thank you to Arsenal Pulp Press for sending me an advance copy of this book.

The ability of a writer to craft a story showing the ills of a society around themselves is a fantastic gift to have. Angie Abdou is one such writer. She has crafted many a good book illuminating many feelings, issues and concerns in our society, using a great combination of serious prose and humour. Many of her fans have been patiently waiting for her novel Between for some time now and they will not be disappointed.

<http://wp.me/p46Ewj-Gk>

Darryl Dux says

My favourite Angie Abdou book...so far.

Sassafras Lowrey says

Captivating voice and a very fast read. I enjoyed the way the story slowly unfolded releasing secrets and heartbreak. I found Vero as a character self indulgent, irresponsible and often annoying which I think, was intentional. I would have welcomed more from LiLi's perspective

Julienne says

Watch for my review in The Winnipeg Review online.

Allison says

Parts of this book pull you along, but others you have to wade through. I found the main character to be very odd and tiring to read about as she swings from emotion to emotion.

Heather(Gibby) says

What a little gem of a novel. It is multilayered, and shows the struggle of an upper class woman (Vero) trying to do it all, battling with her own inner insecurities, trying to be the best she can be. Her husband convinces her to bring in a full time nanny. There are multiple layers within this story, looking at this situation from both Vero's and Legaya (the live in nanny)'s point of view.

Lily Soltani says

I don't know Vero , and I don't understand her frustrations, her confusions, her sexual behaviour, nor her sadness. I may have met Vero though. There is a familiar feeling inside of me while reading her . I may have worked with her or maybe she is one of my neighbors, or she looks like the sad woman beside me on the bus. Whoever she is, I know that I have made a deal with myself that, as long as she is paying me as my

employer, no matter how much she tries, she can't be my close friend. Nothing like the way my friends from my home are. I am not Ligaya either, but I relate to her more in relation to how she looks at the Canadian culture, and how she knows that the key to her survival is to learn this culture and pretend that she is okay with it. Not just okay, more than that. She must show that she is happy. Words can mean different in this culture, even after Ligaya learns the language, she has to be careful about how to use proper words. The employers must think that their subordinates who are from other countries are always fabulous, not just okay. They can't bear the guilt of separating the employee (in this book a nanny) from their families. After all it's not their fault that people in the third world countries live in such conditions that they have to leave. Why would a Canadian healthy family feel guilty for the unfortunate life of someone like Ligaya? She should be grateful, but no, the employers in this book are Canadian, nice Canadians and they should show that they understand and they are not abusive. But then how can they make this new comer understand their way of living? Struggles! Endless struggles! Endless hurtful words, and endless hurtful behaviour. Angie Abdou has opened up the struggles of a new comer to a nice middle class Canadian household. (Not just Vero, her husband and children too.) As Ligaya struggles more, she learns that it has been a challenge for Vero's family too. Knowing that this family is vulnerable, confused and imperfect, empowers her. I found it amazing that the author has captured the struggles of both sides as if she has lived it.

Andrea Nair says

For mothers of young children in particular, the novel BETWEEN by Angie Abdou is an exhilarating, validating and emotional read. Abdou powerfully dives into the mind and body of an exhausted mother as she grapples with the limitations facing her.

The nanny who is hired to improve the main character's life brings reprieve, but also the pain of leaving her own family behind. The tale of these two women as they try to navigate the complexities of their situation, and the husband caught in the middle of it all, is captivating and rich.

(This review was based on an Advanced Reading Copy supplied by the publisher, Arsenal Pulp Press)

Lauren Davis says

Angie Abdou is a deceptive writer. On the surface, her novel might be thought of a domestic drama, a novel of sexual frustration, marital disappointment, the stresses of childrearing and finding the right nanny, but such a reading would miss the political, cultural, and economic subtexts. Her language is lovely, and she uses wonderful, earthy, enfolded imagery. She's also very funny!

Here's what the review from the Winnipeg Free Press had to say. I couldn't say it better myself:

"Reviewed by Julianne Isaacs

Angie Abdou is a boundary-pusher. Whether it's emotional pain or physical exertion, she brings her characters to the limits of human endurance. 2006's *Anything Boys Can Do*, a collection of short stories, explores female sexual politics. Her first novel, *The Bone Cage*, a finalist in CBC's 2011 Canada Reads, is the story of two athletes training for the Olympics. *The Canterbury Trail* (2011) follows a troupe of skiers journeying up and over a mountain.

Between is a natural follow-up to all of these themes, and one way or another, it tackles them all again: sex,

politics, athleticism, even mountains, if you can count entitlement, consumerism and cultural barriers as metaphorical mountains.

Vero and her husband Shane are average middle-class Canadians: she's an editor for a vehicle manufacturing company, he's a pharmacist. They live in a large home in middle-class mountainous Canada with their two children, two cars and too many bicycles, which Shane rides compulsively. All seems normal on the outside—but Vero is on the breaking point, overwhelmed by the challenges of balancing career and motherhood, her sense of personal worth almost smothered into nonexistence. In an attempt to save their disintegrating marriage, and Vero's sanity, they hire a nanny—a Filipino woman named Ligaya—who carries secret burdens of her own.

The potential political pitfalls lining *Between's* pages should already be clear. Middle-class Canadian couple struggles to embody middle-class Canadian ideal, hires third-world import to do the dirty work while they attempt to revitalize their marriage might be the novel's subtitle—and at first glance *Between* seems to be granting legitimacy to this highly problematic crisis.

But Abdou is shrewd: while Vero and Shane's (hashtag) First World Problems are readily apparent, they cannot be written off, for Abdou attends to them with an intense emotional realism. And no attitudes in *Between* are easy to summarize or critique—let alone condemn or defend. Everything is simply laid bare to the reader: Ligaya's loneliness and culture shock, Vero's depression, Shane's helplessness. And the overarching consumerist philosophy that unites all three—if I had this my life would be fixed—makes them makes them familiar to readers also struggling with consumerism.

Vero, pre-nanny, is a hot mess. Some of *Between's* edgiest passages, emotionally speaking, can be found near the beginning of the novel, as Vero folds laundry, cleans up after her three-year-old, Eliot, and baby, Jamal, and tries to remember why her life matters at all. At the limit of her energy, she retreats to a closet with two bottles of wine and sits in the darkness, leaving voicemail messages for her friend:

She thinks of saying, I'm drunk on the pantry floor. "Parenting's hard," she says instead, her tongue slow and heavy. "Whatever made us do it? I mean, really, imagine trying to sell this experience to someone, if we hadn't all bought it already. Here's the pitch: You'll get pregnant. Your body will warp in ways you hadn't thought possible. It'll never be the same again. You'll pee your pants for months afterward, maybe forever. Delivering a baby will hurt until you think you'll die. You'll wish for death ..."

Ligaya—or LiLi, as the family renames her—isn't the ideal solution Vero and Shane have hoped for: granted, she keeps everything perfectly clean and the children tidied away, and puts food on the table. But she resists Vero's efforts to befriend her, to get close to her. To put it another way, a part of Ligaya refuses colonization. Vero can see grief close under Ligaya's efficient surface, but when entrance to it is denied, Vero lapses into daydreams of an idealized friendship: "They could talk about loneliness, not like sisters, maybe, but like friends. Even good friends. LiLi would admit, Yes, yes, I am lonely. Vero imagines them having this conversation cross-legged on LiLi's single bed, under the posters that LiLi has never taken down."

Ligaya's personal struggles are revealed, in slim occasional chapters, in their own right. And she is, indeed, lonely. When Vero and Shane go away on holiday—part of the marriage-revitalization project—she takes the boys into her bed so she can fall asleep close to their warmth: "They are good boys, these two. She puts her nose close to Eliot's hair and lets the scent of baby shampoo carry her to sleep. It is a luxury, she knows, an indulgence. But she takes it."

Vero's white-washed, polite Canadian complicity in a culturally-acceptable system of social hierarchy, is a dark spot staining her conscience that Ligaya prevents her from eradicating through friendship.

But the chief crisis in *Between* comes when Vero and Shane escape their everyday reality for a fantasy vacation to a Jamaican swinger's resort. Their resulting, slow-but-steady forays into sexual hedonism mark the novel's most disturbing passages.

It's a cliché of literary fiction that writing detailed sex scenes is dangerous and can put the writer at risk of receiving some Bad Sex Writing award or other, but Abdou ignores it. And her fearlessness grants the writing a kinetic power—as when Vero, on Shane's urging, hooks up with a stranger in a public pool at the resort, before all eyes. But the brief resulting satisfaction—as much performance as pleasure—sends Vero spiraling: “when her body stops waving and spinning, she slides into the water, wanting to go right under, to sit at the bottom with her nose plugged and her eyes clenched tight. Looking at anyone now would be to own what has just happened. She would rather disappear.” Complete sexual satiety is the final frontier in Vero and Shane's quest for a complete life: but it cannot be purchased without a cost.

Part of Abdou's achievement in *Between* is in her avoidance of the terms “transaction,” “consumption” and “entitlement,” when these are driving themes behind nearly every page. To Vero and Shane, and even, to a certain degree, Ligaya, everything can be purchased if the purchaser has enough capital. Every pleasure is deserved. And everyone, whether or not they are in a position to seize it, is entitled to every pleasure. The consequences of seizing it, however, go deep: deeper than a resort pool, as deep as an ocean—maybe deeper.

Between's descriptive passages are beautifully evoked, magnetic, even hypnotic. And Abdou pulls no punches: she does not avoid the difficult. She plunges right in. While its conclusion pushes too hard for resolution that is unlikely—or even impossible—*Between* remains complex to its final pages. Interpersonal tensions, for Abdou, are mountain ranges dividing people. Whether or not we can scale the heights depends on more than tenacity—more than empathy, even. It depends on our ability to truly see the other as more than a site of exchange."

Sheila Craig says

2.5 stars. I try to avoid spoilers in my reviews but this time I'm finding it necessary to explain what I didn't like about this novel. The first few Paras are spoiler-free and the spoiler is advertised.

I quite enjoyed *Between* through the first half of the book. The setup of the two viewpoint characters, who you know will be connecting before long, is well done. Ligaya is a Filipina looking for a better life in Canada by way of being a nanny starting in Hong Kong. Velo is a woman suffering from post-partum depression, wife of a domineering pharmacist, reluctant mother of two boys, and unfulfilled at work. While Ligaya is quietly self-controlled, determined, and single-pointed in achieving her goals, Velo is quietly aimless, easily pushed around, and utterly unsure of what she wants or where she wants to go in life.

It seems to me that the author had thought out her characters well, and had an eye on the grand crisis of the novel, but didn't really know what to do with the crisis once it had happened. The build up is slow and meandering. The denouement by contrast, is rushed and the ending altogether abrupt.

While Ligaya's character continues to evolve as she learns how to deal with her new life in Canada, and as we learn her secret, Velo continues to flounder and her view-point chapters become somewhat tedious. You just want her to put her foot down, just once. My sympathy for Velo withered and died as the novel progressed. At least I kept hoping for good things for Ligaya. However, her sudden change in personality after the novel's crisis felt forced and

****SPOILER FROM HERE TO END OF REVIEW****

Velo's husband Shane, in yet another attempt to wake his wife from her depression, and in his dominant way, cajoles Velo into a week's holiday at a swingers resort. Velo consents, but her acquiescence is tinged with discomfort throughout the week of utter debauchery. She is uncomfortable, and the reader is definitely uncomfortable at all the reluctant sex women are having to please their husbands. On returning home, things turn from bad to worse heading to the one time in the novel that Velo actually chooses to do something, and it's a really, really bad idea. Velo, echoing her husband's dominance, abuses her position as employer to seduce the vulnerable live-in nanny, Ligaya. Now the reader is VERY uncomfortable.

Having gotten to this point, the author flounders. While Velo and Shane are falling apart, Ligaya suddenly takes charge and in an abrupt reversal of roles, tells her employers how they will all proceed from here.

But the sudden shift in Ligaya's personality, from keeping her head down and enduring what she must, to suddenly taking charge of everyone and saving the day, is too abrupt and feels out of character. The novel ends here, except for a quick glimpse of Ligaya many months later. The reader is not given any sense of what the 'new world order' of the household is - Velo is dropped completely. We never get to adjust to Ligaya's new-found authority, so it doesn't feel real. As a reader I felt abandoned by the author. I needed a denouement that allowed me to recover from the shock of the climax, but it wasn't there.

Alison DeLory says

I particularly enjoyed the perspective of the Philipino nanny living in a Canadian home. Her story was more compelling to me than that of the protagonist, a Canadian professional woman and mom, who is unhappy in her work and marriage. It is a bleak story but it felt believable; that a woman who seems to have so much is left so dissatisfied by it.

Laura Frey (Reading in Bed) says

Whoa... I did not see where this story was going at all. It was very Desperate Housewives at first, and then suddenly got real dark and dirty! The other thing that struck me is how Abdou *makes* the reader judge these characters, while making you see you're not so different. I love that this mom gives zero shits about what other moms are doing, or parenting styles, or anything you read about in the "mommy wars" articles. The real war is against time, and aging, and your partner, and if I want to get real cliché about it, yourself. I'll try to write this up better in my full review!
