



Special

Bella Bathurst

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A group of schoolgirls go off with two teachers on a field trip to the English countryside. They soon discover that the nearby town offers alcohol, drugs, and sex, at once tempting and terrifying. In this illicit, raw new world, isolated from the larger society and its familiar rules and repressions, some become more vulnerable, others more vicious. There are the almost casual daily cruelties the girls inflict on one another, the dangerous fault lines of their friendships, their insecurities and little shames, the awful power of the "most popular" girl and of the "in crowd." The sexual and social pressures that can break a girl emotionally and even physically and mark her forever are freshly and chillingly observed. Many readers will be reminded of Lord of the Flies. In Special, too, the shell of civilization is paper-thin, and the looming implosion of a tiny society inspires dread.

It is not the unfamiliar countryside but the untried emotional landscape these girls must negotiate that proves difficult and disturbing and leads to a shattering conclusion. This is a spellbinding, haunting novel by a brilliant young writer.

Special Details

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Author : Bella Bathurst

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From Reader Review Special for online ebook

Robert Davis says

Whew! These young girls are cruel, cold, ignorant, insecure, sadistic, and all around self-destructive. Reading this book with the hind sight of experience, it is easy to see how difficult adolescence can be, and how brutal people (no matter what their age) can be to each other. This book is merciless in its sharp view on teen girls behaving badly. These girls are ferocious in their savagery to one another, all the while trying to find understanding in themselves and their sheltered world.

Ms. Bathurst is a competent writer, with a journalistic background. Indeed, her descriptions and scenery are vivid and fresh, the dialogue sounds real and legitimate for 13 year old girls. But, as fine as her dialogue is, it is quite too easy to lose track of who is talking. There are long stretches of open dialogue without any reminder of who said what. In fact, I often didn't know who exactly was in the conversation to begin with.

One more thing (view spoiler)

That complaint aside, this is a rewarding read with a satisfying climax. I liked it, but I would have liked it much more had the writing been a bit more polished.

P.S. Over a year after writing this review, and the more I think about it, the ending really has stuck with me. (view spoiler)

P.P.S When I first reviewed this in 2012, I rated it a 4 star book, which I thought was a pretty fair rating. But when a book stays on your mind after so much time, I think it deserves upgrading my rating. I find myself still thinking about the characters and their antics, which says a lot about the book (and probably something about me as well) **5 STARS!**

Melanie Ullrich says

What was the point? I kept waiting for something to happen. Although something does finally happen in the last 40 pages, it wasn't enough for me, to make up for the wasted time reading the other 280 pages! Throughout the book I kept thinking to myself "this is NOTHING like what it said it would be about", but when I look back at the book description, I guess it is accurate (kinda), but I was expecting to be more enthralled. I would expect the same reaction from anyone else who liked books such as Go Ask Alice, and thought this would be in the same line as that. One thing I can say though, is that the author really did a superb job at pinning down that underlying deceitfulness and camaraderie between teenage girls.

Josie says

This book started off on a disturbing note, and it didn't get much better. It was packed with too many issues: anorexia and drugs and disappointing sex and failed friendships and parental problems. I couldn't bring myself to care about any of it when there was so much going on. And I found it hard to believe the girls were supposed to be 13. They were taking their GCSEs early; why not have made them 16? I didn't really feel that

any of them were clever enough to have been taking their GCSEs at that age anyway. Lastly, the book ends with this sentence: "She felt nothing at all." It was off-putting and unsatisfying. I wanted to know more about Ali, and what happened to her after she went to Rob. She was the only character I could identify with to any extent, since she was the most normal and uncomplicated.

Cari says

Bathurst gets major credit for being an amazing character writer. The understanding she displays with each girl (the weird one (Ali), the revolting outcast (Izzy), the queen bitch (Caz), the self-loather (Lola), and the confused fuck-up (Jules)) is what carries this book. It's also what pulls in a reader, an especially effective hook for someone like me, who's only ten years removed from Bathurst's focus group. The characters were the main draw, so brilliantly written and so raw that I was actually uncomfortable throughout a lot of the first half. (Reminded me too much of my own history and brought back too many of the unpleasant emotions and thought patterns that dominated the female middle school mindset.) Beautifully done on that score.

However, the author loses points for having no idea what a streamlined, satisfying plot is. While I spent a lot of time nodding my head, remembering the social hell that was middle school, and relating to several of the characters (all but Caz, actually), I also spent the last third or so of the book rolling my eyes. There were too many things packed together, and as the plot fell completely apart at the end, so did the characterizations that held *Special* together. (Honestly, if Bathurst had ended it about 50 pages earlier around page 244, the book would have picked up another star. One of the tricks of writing is realizing when to stop. Hint: before the plot jumps out of the believable and into the sensational.) Unfortunately, this degeneration is also what made the book so unsatisfying when I finished it. She should have focused on a character study, because the decision to end the book as she did was a bad one. Bad enough that I've marked the book as a trade-in at the used bookstore, instead of granting it the place on my shelf that the first two-thirds earned.

(The last few chapters fell apart so completely that only *Caz* hitting the pavement instead of Jules would have saved it for me, despite the cliche ending and the too-neat wrap-up. Because I knew a Caz or two when I was thirteen and fourteen, and that would have been sweet, sweet karma.)

Also? What the hell was up with the constantly shifting viewpoints between the girls? Distracting and uneven. There was no rhyme or reason to the switch from Ali to Jules or Lola. In fact, I remember the author switching points of view in the middle of a scene once or twice. Was there no good editor around to put a stop to that?

I've also noticed several reviewers on here complaining about how these girls seemed too old to actually be thirteen and fourteen years old. In my experience, this is not the case. I won't get too in-depth (because no one cares *and* my mother is on GoodReads, which could make for some awkward dinner conversation), but the behavior on display in *Special* is not so different from what was going on around me at that age. Sex, alcohol, sneaking out, the fascination with boys, dangerous behavior, setting other girls up for a fall, endangering other girls for a laugh or a step up the social ladder...all of this was rampant, unfortunately. (Hence, the whole "middle school hell" thing.) Of course, I went to a very small private school, which may have amplified the behavior. Your mileage may vary.

Sally Smale says

I had to finish this book despite finding it nasty and depressing just in case there was a ray of hope at the end. If I was the mother of a teenage girl I would be horrified at the picture this paints of their world. Glad I've finally finished it and can move on to more rewarding reads.

Merredith says

this book reminded me of my brother's movie still green. a group of teenaged girls are up in the country with their teachers for a week long field trip, and basically nothing too much happens, until the very end, and then it's over. didnt much like the book, but didnt much dislike it, either.

Emma Williams says

So far I have to confess that this is boring me, but I'm going to try to stick with it as my best friend thinks it's amazing!

Update: I'm really glad I stuck with this as from about a third of the way through I was converted. Powerful and worryingly real. I disagree with other reviewers who think the children were portrayed as too old; the whole point is that this is a book for adults, not a YA book, and therefore the reflections are adult. And as for whether this kind of thing happens to 13/14 year-olds ... sadly, sometimes it does.

Jennifer says

I was challenging myself to read some fiction that was different from my normal fare, and this Advance Reading Copy has been in my collection for a while. (It says the publication date was to be May 9, 2003. This is not very advanced.) This turned out to be very different.

Eight girls and two teachers leave in a minibus for a field trip that sounds like it is supposed to last about two weeks, to the countryside for "undignified exercises." As the girls keep explaining to those they meet - because the teachers don't know what to do with them while they wait for their test results. The girls are 13/14, though they constantly try to pass as older, like girls that age do.

The trip starts with an ominous omen, and the tone of the novel makes clear that it's all going downhill from here, that we will be crashing down to some unseeable crisis. Envy, peer pressure, lack of meaningful supervision, access to a nearby college town with drugs, alcohol, sex, and strange men also staying at the manor house. Many potential sources of outside danger, but it is the girls who will do the most damage to themselves and each other.

It is a compelling read, to be sure. At times I wanted desperately to reach through the pages of the book to shake a character. Or to rip one apart with my bare hands. The girls and all their insecurities are familiar, to be sure. but at times it strained credulity. For instance, are boarding schools still so much a thing? Even in England? What school has a student-teacher ratio that could send two teachers with eight girls for two

weeks? (All the other girls are also on similar trips with other teachers at the time.) I know drinking ages are different in England, but would 13-year-old girls really be allowed to get falling down drunk at a pub?

Not my favorite, but it was good. Would recommend to fans of sinister coming-of-age tales. Or someone who needed to be slapped in the face with the pressures on young teen girls.

Katharine (Ventureadlaxre) says

I think something was amiss in this book, even for me. Something was off kilter with the writing style as if it was loping along on a bad foot. She tried to 'identify' with every kind of girl to the point where it was just ridiculous and I sadly, couldn't continue.

Oh well, from the other reviews it doesn't look like I missed out on much.

Ella says

In Ms. Bathurst's fiction debut, she delves into the "fierce and subversive" lives of a group of "teenage" girls. Chronicling a week in the girls' lives during a field trip in the English countryside, she explores the pain and controversial feelings that accompany many a person at this time in their lives – the yearning for adulthood combined with a fear of growing up.

This novel was very meaningful to me. Rarely have I encountered a book that has caused my jaw to drop and my eyes to dart back and forth across the page with such recognition of emotions. Bathurst delivers raw, biting thoughts that I myself can remember having on so many occasions. I think this is what makes this novel so interesting. It is so accurate a portrayal of real adolescent feelings that anyone can recognize themselves in the characters. I myself could relate to almost all the main characters in one way or another, from Julia's jealousy to Lola's self loathing. I was actually very surprised at reading this novel and seeing these feelings in black and white print because I thought that they were thoughts only I had, dark desires and worries that I believed no one else on the planet experienced. "Special" proved me wrong, and for that I am grateful.

However, the plot is quite another story. First of all, these children are THIRTEEN YEARS OLD. Are English teens just far more mature than our girls over here in the States? Maybe my friend's and I were just the epitome of lame when, at thirteen, we were more interested in ponies than pornography, secrets instead of sex, and books instead of boys. Is it my utter lack of knowledge about the English maturity levels of young women that raises questions of accuracy in my mind? Perhaps. Or maybe these "tweens" are just a tad too grown-up to be realistic.

As far as the story itself is concerned, it isn't remarkable in any arena, good nor bad. It is merely average, although certain aspects of it were made shockingly unrealistic to me by their age. The ending was very, well, interesting. I got the feeling Bathurst wasn't quite sure how to end her story, so she did what she thought would be best. It was an entertaining read, and the emotional truth of the novel made up for the lack of interest in the storyline.

Andy says

Wow, I can't believe all the hate for this book. Pretty decent read about a gaggle of 14 year-old British girls on some lousy field trip in Shite-on-Avon or some other dung heap village looking for cheap thrills when the super hen teachers aren't guarding them like hawks. All through the book I couldn't stop thinking of Lush playing "Thoughtforms" or "Scarlet".

JMC says

What I like about the book is how I somehow connect with the three main characters, Ali, Hen (Lola is her real name) and Jules (Julia). I relate to them in a way that I have their characteristics, not all but bits of themselves. But Ali, she's the one who I can really relate to. We have the same life, same views about others and we love to read and be alone. Jules is an insecure being but hides it by being bitchy, Hen is an indenial anorexic. The story circled on this three girls while also mentioning their other classmates. There is also this character named Caz (Catherine) who seems to be the reason why Jules is insecure but bitchy (she envy Caz and her perfect body and grades) and Hen who wants also to be Caz. In the last pages of the book she admitted to herself that the reason why she wanted to be thin was because of Caz. Caz is sort of the leader. She was admired by everyone and she has this side that no one can resist.

At first, I thought their ages are 16 to 17 but I was wrong. All of them are a bunch of 13-year-old though Ali turned 14 in the book (Ali, actually is the most behaved in the group). I shouldn't be schocked but I still can't believe that at a very young age, these girls are already acting like older teenagers who are interested in sex, hard drinks and hooking up with boys who are older than them. I know that this isn't new. There are a lot of youngsters who are like them but that's the reason why it's disturbing.

Bella Bathurst showed the current state of young teenagers today and the could be reason why they are like that.

Cath says

Disturbing and thought provoking, and had me hooked after 2 pages. Could recognise my own youth / friends in the characters portrayed, and it reminded me of the pains of growing up. It's one of those books that you keep thinking about after you have finished reading it.

Tatiana says

a decently amusing though ridiculous book. it's like she tried to pile every single adolescent girl issue into one book. it's kind of like watching a degrassi marathon actually.

though the 'ohmigodi'mgayscene' is hilarious.

Britt says

German title: Feindinnen

Four troubled teenage girls spend an eventless week on a field trip. And that's basically it. If the German version hadn't had the words "psychological thriller" on its cover I would never have finished it. So I was waiting for the thriller elements while continuing reading ... but they never happened. The book wasn't bad but I just had the wrong expectations.

Why swapped? Interesting blurb

Why read? Book challenge TT

Soobie can't sleep at night says

L'ho letto all'epoca nella vasca da bagno. Mi son distratta e il libro è caduto in acqua... A parte questo, non ho idea di dove si trovi questo libro. Non mi ricordo se l'ho donato alla biblio o l'ho regalato a qualcuno, però era rovinato. Oppure se è rimasto in qualche anfratto di casa. Perso tra la carta che ingombra casa Mennym.

Comunque. Avevo vent'anni quando è uscito, ma questo libro è riuscito a disgustarmi. Quelle bimbette che cercavano di sembrare grandi e combinavano un sacco di pasticci nel frattempo. Erano cattive e tendenzialmente stupidotte... Cercano di sembrare adulte ma si fanno solo male...

Che brutta impressione che mi ha lasciato

Bah, se questa è la generazione moderna siamo perduti...

Nevin R says

I honestly hated this book. I had to actually force myself to finish it because I can't leave a book without getting to an ending.

its so full of hate, I've never seen such amount of hate come from anyone.

I wouldn't want my sister reading this, its pretty messed up and it made me cringe in a lot of parts.

I dont think I'll ever recommend this to anyone.

Heather says

This book took me a while to get through and there were many times when I was a little bored. But it had an ending that stuck with me.

erica says

An absolutely horrifying novel about a group of wicked fourteen-year-old girls on a two week long school trip to a manor in the English countryside. It's a good story that will keep you awake at night but also sheds light on the issues that adolescent girls face including sex, eating disorders, and various societal pressures.

Louise Beilby says

I went to a mixed comprehensive school as a teenager, so I know little of the sort of atmosphere that might exist at an all-girls' boarding school. All I can say is, if Special is anything to go by, I think I might have had a lucky escape.

For those American readers who are confused about whether this is representative of British teenagers in general - when I was 13 or 14, I was a complete geek and a swot and would no more have sneaked out to meet men in a pub than I would have flown to the moon, but from what I overheard the popular girls talking about, I was very much in a minority. The dialogue doesn't strike me as being "too clever" for girls of that age either, since many of them are just repeating things that they've read or heard other people saying.

So many scenes stand out for me - the horrendous, disturbing episode where Jules loses her virginity in an incident which borders on rape; Lola remembering the first time she had to go bra shopping; the mixture of excitement and dread which accompanies the preparation for an illicit night out; the bike ride which ends in disaster on a hot, flat summer's day; the discovery of what Lola has been doing with all her food during her stay. It is beyond me how anyone can criticise this book by saying that "nothing happens". It's packed with the sort of incidental detail and shifts in power and fragmentation of friendship that anyone who's ever been a teenage girl will relate to (and feel glad that they've left behind).

The only character who isn't entirely successful for me is Ali, even though she is probably the one who is most like the 13-year-old me. She is so secretive and unknowable that I never really cared about her outcome, although what she eventually did caused me a certain amount of alarm for her safety. What sort of man would make that kind of offer to a girl of that age?
