



Towelhead

Alicia Erian

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Thirteen-year-old Jasira wants what every girl wants: love and acceptance and the undivided attention of whoever she's with. And if she can't get that from her parents, then why not from her mother's boyfriend, or her father's muscle-bound neighbor, Mr. Vuoso? Alicia Erian's incandescent debut novel, *Towelhead*, will ring true for readers who remember the rarely poetic transition from childhood to young adulthood. Jasira is a creature of contradiction: both innocent (reading romantic intentions into the grossest displays of lust) and oddly clear-sighted, especially when it comes to the imbalance of power, and the things we do for love. When her mother exiles her to Houston to live with Jasira's strict, quick-to-anger Lebanese father, she quickly learns what aspects of herself to suppress in front of him. In private, however, she conducts her sexual awakening with all the false confidence that pop culture and her neighbor's *Playboy* magazines have provided.

Jasira tells her story with candor and glimmers of dark, unexpected humor--as when she describes her mother's boyfriend Barry's assistance in her personal grooming: "A week later, Barry broke down and told her the truth. That he had shaved me himself. That he had been shaving me for weeks. That he couldn't seem to stop shaving me." The freshness of her narrative voice sets *Towelhead* apart from the sentimental or purely harsh treatment of similar subject matter elsewhere, and makes the novel a promising follow-up to Erian's well-regarded short story collection, *The Brutal Language of Love*. --*Regina Marler*

Towelhead Details

Date : Published April 10th 2006 by Simon Schuster (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9780743285124

Author : Alicia Erian

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Fiction, Young Adult, Coming Of Age, Contemporary, Adult Fiction

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From Reader Review Towelhead for online ebook

Jon says

Reminiscent of *Diary of a Teenage Girl*, *Towelhead* is a flawed 1st novel that is equal parts clumsy and poignant. Detailing a year in the life of Jasira, a 13-year-old girl from a broken home with an American mother and an Arab father, the novel feels a little overstuffed. There are far too many plates that the author, Alicia Erian, tries to keep spinning as she tackles burgeoning female sexuality, sexual and physical abuse, racism, the culture clash between American born children and their foreign-born parents, and the dynamics of a broken home. Heady subject matter that is probably too much to tackle in a single novel. In less than 30 pages (the first chapter and a few pages into the 2nd chapter) the following happens:

- Jasira sent to live with her father after her mother's boyfriend confesses to having a Lolita-like obsession with her
- Jasira immediately clashes with her father
- Saddam invades Kuwait
- Jasira is called a towelhead
- Jasira has her first period
- Jasira has her first orgasm
- Her new next-door neighbor, a racist Army reservist, starts to become infatuated with her also.

Erian makes some questionable decisions in the book. For example, Jasira becomes friends with Thomas, a boy at school, in an initially "let's hang out at lunch" middle school boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Then, in a clumsy plot point, her father becomes incensed when he discovers the boy is African-American and tells her she can't see him anymore. So the father who is upset that his next-door neighbor is a racist, is a racist himself? Aiming for irony, the author hits heavy-handedness instead. One of the weaknesses of the novel are the sections that deal with Jasira and Thomas. They are only in the 8th Grade, yet Thomas, in particular, is portrayed as too sexually precocious and knowledgeable to be realistic. Jasira loses her virginity to Thomas in an encounter noticeably missing most of the awkward fumbling usually associated with first times as teenagers (don't ask about mine). It's obvious that Erian is drawing a contrast between the encounters Jasira has with Thomas and the rough, exploitative encounters that Jasira has with her next-door neighbor, a married reservist in his 30's. It's obvious and a little clumsy and amateurish.

One of the strengths of the book is the characterizations. Confused and vulnerable, Jasira comes across as a fully three-dimensional character and Erian does an equally good job with the secondary characters. The parents, in particular, are well drawn and while they aren't very sympathetic characters, they feel "real" and flawed in a very human way. It's the interaction between Jasira and her divorced parents that gives the novel much of its poignancy. The divorce was acrimonious and Jasira is often used as a pawn in the on-going struggle between the parents.

The novel tackles emotional, physical and sexual abuse. In perhaps the surest sign that there is too much happening in the novel, the sexual exploitation that Jasira suffers from her married next-door neighbor is almost a minor plot point. The emotional abuse she suffers from both parents and the physical abuse she suffers from her father takes up the bulk of the story. Judgmental and emotionally distant, quick to anger and quick to hit, her father is as much a villain as the neighbor is. In a passage that broke my heart, her father lashes out after being told by his ex-wife that Jasira hated him:

"I went to hug him then. I couldn't help it. Not just from that moment, but from the day before, when it had

seemed like he'd been defending me a little from my mother. As soon as I reached my arms toward him, though, he hit me in the face. I fell backward onto the breakfast nook floor. "We don't hug people we hate," he said, then he went in his room and shut the door"

Definitely poignant in spots, the book would have been better if Erian had chosen a few less topics to try and stuff into a relatively thin book and the sexual abuse subplot is disturbing and more distracting than integral to the overall story.

Banafsheh Serov says

Jasira, a 13 year old Arab-American girl has been sent by her mother to live with the Lebanese father she barely knows. Jasira is not happy living with her father; he alienates her with his strict rules, harsh punishments and lack of affection. Alone and confused about her rapidly changing body she looks to people around her to fill the void. She meets her neighbour Melina who becomes Jasira's confidant and protector, taking on the parental responsibilities neglected by Jasira's parents. She also meets Mr. Vuoso, an Army reservist whose inappropriate attentions escalate to abuse.

'Towelhead' challenges the reader by not shying away from often uncomfortable and evocative subjects. The title was a little misleading as I had wrongly assumed it was about the difficulties of growing up Muslim in America during the first Gulf War- something similar to 'Does my head look too big in this.'

Jasira's character is surprisingly unsophisticated and ignorant towards her changing body. After all what 13 year old American girl does not know about tampons? Aside from the media advertising and programs, schools spend a lot of time educating the kids about their changing bodies and appropriate and inappropriate touching.

'Towelhead' now out as a Hollywood movie starring Toni Collett, makes for a confronting but not always believable read.

Alecia Whitaker says

Warning: it contains graphic language.

Warning: it will break your heart.

The main character is a 13 year old girl who experiences moving to a new state, having no one to turn to when her body starts to grow and change, parents of different races in an ugly divorce, being the target of racism, and physical and sexual abuse all in the course of one school year.

There is a lot of dialogue and it's a VERY FAST READ. I couldn't put it down. I love this book. My heart was truly breaking for this girl and I couldn't stop thinking about her for the longest time... or rather, for the young girls that she represents.

Rakisha says

sigh

I picked up the book *Towelhead: A novel* because I was intrigued by the New York Times' review of the movie directed by Alan Ball (of *Six Feet Under* and *American Beauty*). I also picked it up, because I'm

always interested in how authors' portray the burgeoning sexuality of preteen and teen girls especially now that teenagers seem more sexualized than ever. Towelhead did a good job of exploring 13-year-old Jasira's sexuality. The proof is by how uncomfortable I felt reading this book.

In order to truly understand Jasira's reasoning, one has to remember what it was like to be a teenager. As an adult, I can see the faulty decisions of my adolescence with 20/20 hindsight. Back then, the decisions seemed okay. Towelhead was so uncomfortable because so much of the confused sexual feelings and experimentation was familiar to me.

I couldn't stop reading this book, and completed it in just one day. I wanted to rush to the end to see if this girl would ever get her head on straight. (To say yea or nay would spoil the ending.) Although I could relate to Jasira's sexual naïveté, I did become disgusted by it. Even at 13-years-old, I knew the difference between a "good" touch and a "bad touch" even though I was taught, like Jasira, to be ashamed of even the good touches. But that was probably supposed to be a reflection on Jasira's parents' lack of parenting.

SIGH With all that said, I can't say whether or not I liked the book. It was just too disturbing. Once I get over the shock of it, I'll come back and rate it.

Gitte says

A dark and sad story about sexual abuse, racism, neglect and violence, but also a humorous page-turner about growing up and discovering your sexuality, told in a light tone that will make you laugh.

The Beginning: *My mother's boyfriend got a crush on me, so she sent me to live with Daddy.*

Jasira, an Arab-American girl of 13, is sent off to live with her father whom she hardly knows. We follow her quest for love and acceptance as she discovers her sexuality and tries hard to make friends in a place of twisted rolemodels.

I've had this one on my shelf for ages, but when I finally started it, I finished it in no time. The characters and plot are both engrossing, and I desperately wanted to know what would happen next.

The subjects of the novel are dark: sexual abuse, racism, neglect and violence, but it is told in a light tone through the naïveté of a child. On top of that, it was very well-written. It seemed like Alicia Erian really understood her protagonist and her mixed feelings of love, loneliness, guilt and shame. In spite of dark subjects, the book made me laugh out loud many times. I highly recommend this book to anyone who appreciates a good story about growing up.

Daddy got mad when people made assumptions about him, but I liked it. It made me feel someone wanted to know me. Even if they were wrong, it didn't matter. It mattered only that they were trying.

My blog: The Bookworm's Closet

Tony DuShane says

towelhead is spectacular.

Irina says

4.5 stars. Could not put it down. It really made me think deeply about children and their need for affection, understanding & knowledge. Deeply compelling & unique in its honesty.

Sue Gerhardt Griffiths says

It is impossible to rate this book with just one specific star.

2 stars for its graphic descriptions and POV from a 13 year old

3 & 4 stars for the in-between nice bits, shame they were scarce

5 stars for Alicia Erian's incredible writing and for Melina and Gil

Bloody hell. Not what I was expecting at all. Two words that come to mind after reading this novel. Gross and yuck. This was one big icky read and utterly disturbing. I cannot ever recall squirming so much while reading a book. I hated every single character in this story, ok, not Melina and Gil - they were totally awesome, but all other characters were despicable and I'm still trying to process (13 yr old) Jasira's graphic narration told throughout this book. Hard, hard going, many times I wanted to give up reading this shocking story but there was a need to read to the end in order to find out what happens to Jasira.

I Googled the author this morning and came across 'Interview with Alicia Erian on Towelhead,' it was quite interesting to read that some aspects of Towelhead is autobiographical.

It's not really a book I recommend to everyone but possibly a book that every parent should read but be warned it's very upsetting.

Book 'e' of the a-z author challenge 2018

Elyse says

I read this YEARS ago. I saw it come through the want-to-read dailies... And I was brought right into the story. Sad... Raw... A little intense.

Monica says

Man. What can I say about this book? It was kind of an emotional roller-coaster ride. I read the whole thing in about a week and a half, so if you're looking for something that will keep your interest, this will not disappoint. But be prepared to feel violated. I was so disturbed by every single one of the characters (our heroine included) and could not decide who to get behind. As soon as I would start to feel the slightest bit of empathy for the girl, or her father, or her boyfriend, or whomever, they would turn around and smack me across the face. If you are looking for a very VERY dark, sexually disturbed, coming-of-age story, this one's for you!

Hugh Jones says

I loved this book! What I liked about it was the "greyness" of it. I first saw the movie on TV...or part of the movie and it made me too uncomfortable, but there definitely was something to it, so I thought I'd read the book. Now I'd like to see the movie again. Really, there are no perfectly "good" characters, and no really "bad" characters, including the young girl who was the center of the story. Lots of sexual content, and not for the faint of heart! What did Freud call us when we are young..."Polymorphous perverse"....we are curious about everything...how it feels, how it tastes, etc and we learn not to be curious about (or not to tell people we are curious about) certain things. Whenever I read books like this I wonder what the author's experience was...it is either something that has happened to the author or is something that the author has thought about and is important enough to her to put it in the story. This was a hard read and I did a lot of thinking about it but I felt that I really grew from reading it.

Hugh

LARRY says

As posted in [<http://www.amazon.com>]:

Wow! I'm not sure if I'm supposed to like the book because of the style of writing and the bold approach of a topic or if I'm supposed to hate it because of a sensitive topic. I can say one thing...that Erian didn't hold back her creative juices. It's so good I thought that it was actually a memoir.

Feeling threatened by her daughter, especially when her boyfriend spills a revelation, thirteen-year-old Jasira is sent to live with her Lebanese father in Houston. Prior to this, Jasira's relationship with her father was practically non-existent. Both father and daughter try to make the best of the new living situation.

Towelhead is a book of contradictions, especially Jasira. Jasira, as a young girl, is naive to the things of the world and the desires of men. At the same time, Jasira knows what she wants, which is love and acceptance and she'll get it from anyone, whether it be from her father, her hunky married neighbor, her boyfriend or her other neighbor who is pregnant.

Confused yet eager, she chooses to seek the company and attention of her hunky neighbor. This is where readers may be turned off and stop reading or cautiously continue. I can say that this is not easy reading not only because of the sexual nature but because of the eventual eruption of emotions and reactions to this

incident.

You'll not only read their emotions but you'll feel emotional. You'll be angry at Jasira's mom for her ultimatums and blind devotion to her boyfriends. You'll react in shock to her father's discipline. You'll bite your nails while Jasira's boyfriend pressures her to do things. You'll want to slap the neighbor's kid and his "get-away-with-murder" antics.

Just read the book.

Jamie Felton says

Coming-of-age story starring an extremely sexually precocious thirteen year old whose father is a control freak and whose mother is immature and irresponsible. She sends Jasira to live with her father because she perceives that her boyfriend is paying too much attention to her daughter. It is difficult to read this without wanting to place blame on one parent or the other for how Jasira behaves with men; however, Jasira too seems to be responsible for some of what happens to her. Although in the end, Jasira seems to have learned something, there is not a whole lot of character development. It is still a good read by a new author and has some interesting things to say about sex and being a teenager (though I don't think it should ever be considered a young adult novel; it is fairly explicit).

Sara Batkie says

Wry, risky, intensely readable. I've never read a more earnest narrative voice that depicted the inner life of a thirteen year old girl. Even though Jasira's adolescent experience was nothing like mine, Erian's crystalline writing made it mine. I cringed for her, I was angry for her, I loved her and wished her well when I had to leave her. I worried as I got to the climax that the wheels were going to fall off but it ends with such a lovely, hopeful moment that I really can't fault Erian for a little melodrama along the way. I don't quite know how she did it but she was admirably evenhanded with everyone from teenage girl to predatory next door neighbor to strict Middle Eastern father. I hear the film version is less successful in this respect so I'm glad I decided to read the book first. I highly recommend it to (very) mature teen readers and parents alike. Fuck, I recommend it to anyone who's been through adolescence and lived to tell the tale. Just don't read it on public transport. I turned so red people probably thought I was choking.

Kayla says

I picked this book up really not knowing what I was getting myself into. The further I read, the more I questioned whether or not I should continue. I did finish it, however, probably because of my incessant curiosity on how a story will end.

I am not exactly sure whether or not I really enjoyed this book. I do know I will not be recommending it to anyone because of the sensitive material. At times I really felt like the protagonist was beyond naive and the other characters were unrealistically sexual and brave (or just stupid). Sometimes I just felt like the author just wanted an excuse to add as much sexual material as possible, no matter how unlikely the situation. I also felt the story took an improbable turn and I was not convinced the story was believable. I guess the biggest

positive was that the book kept me entertained during a 5 hour drive.
