



Derby Girl

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Meet Bliss Cavendar, a blue haired, indie-rock loving misfit stuck in the tiny town of Bodeen, Texas.

Her pageant-addicted mother expects her to compete for the coveted Miss Blue Bonnet crown, but Bliss would rather feast on roaches than be subjected to such rhinestone tyranny.

Bliss' escape? Take up Roller Derby.

When she discovers a league in nearby Austin, Bliss embarks on an epic journey full of hilarious tattooed girls, delicious boys in bands, and a few not-so-awesome realities even the most bad-assed derby chick has to learn.

Derby Girl Details

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Lani says

Full disclosure: I'm a derby girl who saw Whip It twice before it was officially released. I'm also a devout fan of Drew Barrymore, and Ellen Page. This book had to really hustle to come anywhere near a movie that I really enjoyed and believed.

Since I just recently saw the movie, of course, I'm left comparing the book. In a rare occurrence, I actually preferred the movie. Unfortunately, this means my review is a lot more about how well the movie managed things that the book didn't.

Ultimately, the book is a reasonably motivating chick lit title about a sport I love. If nothing else, a book that exposes young women to roller derby, and presents it as a sport - a fast-paced, punk rock, crowd-exciting, chick-empowering, all-embracing SPORT - can't be too bad. It's certainly a unique subject matter.

Take the roller derby out and it's a fairly generic teen romance. Girl is an outcast and struggles both at school and at home with her indie rock sensibilities. Soulmate/kindred spirit best friend vs. hottie rocker boyfriend ends in tears and eventual kiss and makeups. Mom and Dad come to terms with their little girl growing up. All pretty universal themes.

And the movie takes these themes, expands on them, and takes the mis-steps of the book and brings Bliss to an even more satisfactory end. In the book, Bliss spends a lot of time complaining about her situation or moping or being snarky. Of course, any inner monologue will have a bit much teenage angst and introspection, and the book takes that self-pity to a level that Ellen Page never hits in the movie. Where the movie shows sparkling well-rounded characters, the book relies on derby names to create a character who we never really see. Book Bliss spends most of her time reacting to the situations she's left in rather than initiating some action, and I'm not nearly as satisfied with the book's pat happy ending.

I just wasn't thrilled with Derby Girl (and I didn't think the movie was exactly brilliant either), mostly because it seemed that the characters were more annoying and less human than they were portrayed in the movie. I expected a more endearing mom, a less snarky more sweet and self-aware Bliss, and roller girls that existed outside of their derby personas. I think I'd rather my (theoretical) daughter watch the movie, since it flaunts the girl-power theme in a much more accessible way while still addressing the issues that the book goes after.

If you're reading the book because you're interested in derby, go see a bout in person. If you're reading the book because you saw Whip It, you'll be disappointed. If you're reading the book because you're looking for a generic YA book with an eye-catching cover, fair enough, but don't expect to find anything particularly thrilling inside. And if you read the book and can't imagine why they made it into a movie, give Whip It a chance. It breathes life into these characters in a beautiful way that makes these relationships - all of them - much more believable and honest than Cross displays them here.

Alie says

I absolutely LOVED this book. I've been putting off buying it and putting off buying it ever since I first

watched the film, and I'm never usually one to worry about that kind of thing. I love books and I love films, and I can usually appreciate both for what they are, but that film was so close to my heart that I was scared to read this incase they had messed up the film majorly. I am so, so pleased to say that that wasn't the case. This book was better than the film, in my opinion, and here is why; this book is written almost like a journal, like a constant diary entry that tells the story of a teen girl stuck in a world she doesn't belong in. It is written in such a way that you are rooting for Bliss the moment her first words travel through your brain, and you just can't let go of that 'you go girl' feel. This book is witty, sarcastic and so real. It is pure and fun and I absolutely adored it. I will definitely be reading this book again and I will definitely be passing it on to friends.

Nadia says

While the main character's brand of selfish sarcasm wasn't for me, the roller derby aspects of the novel made up for her. Like Bliss, I'm also from small town Texas and frequent the capital city. I loved the references to places I know and love (thank god that Waterloo is still around) but much of the novel felt trite. I hope the movie focuses more on the derby.

El says

Yeah, that's right. I read a young adult book. Let's all gasp in unison and move on. I should also state immediately that I would not have found out about this book if Drew Barrymore hadn't just made the movie *Whip It* which is based on this book. While I also don't normally read books just because of the movie that's come out, I actually want to see the movie and can't bring myself to do it seriously without at least trying to read the book. And I love roller derby.

Bliss Cavendar is a 16-year-old stuck in Bodeen, TX, a small "hicktown" where no one understands her, least of all her parents. Her mother is obsessed with pageants and wants Bliss to follow in her footsteps when all Bliss wants to do is rock out and be a punk kid. She is, after all, 16. She totally falls in love with Austin's roller derby teams and makes it her mission to join and be accepted by other people like herself. Through a series of lies and deceptions Bliss makes it and rawks, but of course life continues on around her and she realizes that, "Wait, life isn't all peaches n cream when I find likeminded people."

While not a *horrible* story, I hated the voice of Bliss. It was like Shauna Cross saw the movie *Juno* and then wrote this book with Ellen Page in mind. And maybe she did, I don't know. It's too annoying for words though. Plus, I might be a fan of parenthetical thoughts (I mean, who isn't really?), the use of parentheses in this book is astronomical. I haven't been so annoyed by something like that since I read *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* which was all about similar affects.

I could totally imagine this as a movie though, and yes, am not ashamed to say I will probably be going to see it today. I support Drew Barrymore and many of her endeavors, and again, I love me some roller derby. I hope Drew pulls it off and I expect great things from this movie. Well, I expect *better* things from this movie. It practically writes itself while you read the book.

Kate says

Bliss Cavendar is dying in the cultural desert that is Bodeen, Tx. Bliss does not look like your average Bodeen resident, with her blue hair and 80's bands t-shirts. Her life is changed when she discovers a roller derby league in nearby Austin, and decides to try out. After a few falls on her old barbie skates, Bliss is reborn as Babe Ruthless, jammer for the Hurl Scouts. She hides her participation from her parents, and her age from the other girls on the team (must be 18 to try out). While juggling all of this she even manages to find the perfect boy. But everything falls apart when Bliss's pageant loving mother, enters her into a competition on the same day as the league championships.

OK. I have some major problems with this book. First, I wish the author could have made this more authentic. When I first started the book, I thought she might have never been to a roller derby bout. I was shocked to find out she was actually part of a league!! Second, I wish the author had been more consistent. She makes up all these great names for characters and places but then never uses them again! Lastly, it is just too damn happy. The whole point of this book is that this alternative girl wants to get out of Hicksville, Tx but there is a lot of bad stuff that happens and it still is all wrapped up with a happy bow! Including that she has sex with her boy friend and weeks later he cheats on her and it only takes her about 5 minutes to get over it. I sincerely hope this is a better movie, but Shauna Cross wrote the screenplay so I don't hold much hope.

Gabrielle says

When Jason and I started dating, one of the first "summer fun in Montreal" activities we did together was attend a ton of roller derby games. After watching the New Skids on the Block give the Sexpos a good trashing, he asked me if I'd seen the movie "Whip It!", which I hadn't. He didn't waste much time correcting that, and I was pretty happy because I loved the movie. When I saw that Shauna Cross had written the screenplay based on her novel "Derby Girl", I wanted to check it out.

This is one of those rare occurrences where the movie is a huge improvement over the source material. The story remains essentially the same: Bliss Cavendar is her tiny Texas hicktown's token misfit, with a beauty-pageant addicted mother and a somewhat indifferent father. She falls in love with roller derby, makes it into the Austen derby league, meets the cute guitarist of an indie-rock band. But eventually her old world and her new world collide and things get complicated.

Every time I read a YA book, I always end up wondering why I put myself through this. Not because the writing or stories are bad, but more because I expect a bit more than they ultimately deliver. The irritating immaturity of Bliss' voice had me gritting my teeth: I'm not really a fan of teenage girls (yes, I used to be one: I didn't especially like myself either at that point, and would probably punch myself in the face if I had a time-machine) because they are annoying, self-absorbed and whiny. I guess that makes Bliss realistic? In the movie, Ellen Page offers a quieter and deeper take on the abrasive character, which makes her a lot more likable. The other characters are not as developed in the book as they are in the movie (weird, huh?): a lot of stereotyping, cool derby names that attempt to make up for lack of substance and background (example: Maggie Mayhem in the book is in her mid-twenties and she doesn't do much; in the movie, she is a kick-ass single-mom played by Kristen Wiig). The relationship with Oliver also comes across as more realistic in the movie... Good grief...

If you like roller derby, skip this book: watch the movie and get some skates.

Timothy says

While taking a slightly Hollywood view of view of both adolescence and roller derby; this is a tightly plotted, enjoyable, quick read. The first few chapters I couldn't shake the sound of Ellen Page's voice as a voiceover—despite only having seen the movie *Whip It* (which was born of Shauna Cross' novel) once, more than three years ago. However, as the story begins to move forward, the narrative voice finds its footing, and the novel settles into an engaging rhythm.

There are some interesting short-comings here, although nothing to detract from the experience of the novel. The heroine Bliss "Babe Ruthless" Cavendar's immersion into the world of roller derby is somewhat glossed over, as she goes from Bambi-like first steps onto the track to MVP of her very first bout in an astonishing brevity of pages. The die-hard derby fan might love to spend more time with her team, immersed in the not-really-all-that-fictionalized world of Austin roller derby near the dawn of the modern roller derby revival; but the novel strikes the right balance between Bliss trapped in a backwater town, under the oppressive thumb of her pageant-obsessed mother, and her emotionally liberating experiences in the vibrant world of roller derby. I found Bliss' loss of virginity somewhat cavalier (but then is that all that uncommon for a great many teens?), but there are some genuine enough repercussions later on.

The author does a masterful job of disguising the fact that she is actually writing about a *banked-track* roller derby team—a rare animal in the modern era—but the camaraderie, competition, and culture she depicts are universal across all roller derby leagues. Interestingly absent is any of the on-track brawling depicted in the movie, that, while gone from the modern sport these days, would have been authentic in pre-2007 Austin (at least according to *Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track*).

Given that this is about a 16 year old, lying about her age to skate for an adult league, this story is somewhat of a fantasy. I will continue to long for a more authentic novel more fully reflective of a modern roller derby experience, and perhaps more deeply immersed in the world. That being said: *Derby Girl* is great as light YA. It's enjoyably entertaining as a roller derby novel, and definitely worth the read.

I'd rather rate this 3.5 if it were possible.

Kelsey says

Shauna Cross's characters read like they were trying too hard to be "different" and "edgy". Mostly I only had a problem with Bliss, our protagonist, who was more obnoxious than she was endearing. Do yourself a favor and just see the movie instead. Ellen Page at least made Bliss a likable heroine.

Evie says

sigh

I hope that Shauna Cross is a better screenwriter than an author. The book reads from the perspective of a sixteen year old girl, but the writing style is as developed as that of a nine year old girl. Somehow this book

managed to make feminist rebel girl culture look lame and immature. "How could my best friend shoplift without me? That was OUR thing!"

The characters: square-peg blue-haired rebel girl, stern overbearing mother who wants daughter to be a "lady", apathetic dad, picture perfect little sister, oddball ethnic best friend, rival popular girl at school, cool teacher, submissive part-time job supervisor, bass-playing indie love interest, derby team captain ally, rival derby mean girl. Insert all previous characters into a predictable formulaic coming-of-age snoozefest.

Can you be both a sardonic hipster and an airheaded valley girl? Apparently. Whatever! Don't forget to add that main character Bliss is also smarter than everyone in a position of power and immediately also the best jammer in the league. Yeah, sure.

I read it for the derby element, which was merely a footnote in this hastily written mess. Yuck. I think on this rare occasion, the movie ("Whip It") may trump the book.

Hristina says

This was such a fun read. I loved the story, but the writing style wowed me even more.

Heather says

This book inspired me to be a Roller Derby girl. Strike that, it inspired me to attempt long boarding, which was great fun, but not something I think I have any business doing. Anywho, onto the good stuff.

Bliss hates her life. She is an emo punk rocker, minus the rocker skills, stuck in small town U.S.A. No one except for her nerdy best friend Pash understands her and her mother seems hell-bent on tormenting her with her intense desire to turn her Goth obsessed daughter into a superficial beotch, I mean beauty queen. *gags*. Thankfully Bliss shares my sentiment on such things.

Bliss wants to break away from her shit hole of a town, where small minds rule and vanity trumps intelligence and insight. But life changes for Bliss when a fateful trip to an Austin vintage shop uncovers a world where women not only reject ribbons and lace, they rip them to shreds, and mock them mercilessly.

Bliss enters the world of Women's Roller Derby and quickly joins the Hurl Scouts, adopting the derby name of Babe Ruthless. I would have gone with Dolly Spartan myself, but who am I to judge? It is in this world of hard core roller mashing that Bliss discovers her inner fire if you will and ignites.

WhipIt is a great coming of age tale for any of us females with snide humor who prefer live outside of the box, are in possession of musical taste and wouldn't mind befriending women who can kick an ass while boasting names such as 5 Scar General and Emma of the State.

Katie says

Stone me now, but I hated this. I thought the portrayal of derby was incorrect in several instances (a 16 year old sneaks on the team, and no one knows?) and the character was a little unlikable to me. Writing style was immature and underdeveloped. Yuck.

Melissa Pilakowski says

When I watched this movie for the first time, I imagined what a great novel this could have been. I loved the awkwardness of Ellen Page, the rich characters of Marcia Gay Harden and Daniel Stern as her parents, and the overall touching coming of age story. At the end of the movie, I saw in the credits that it was based on a book by Shauna Cross.

At that moment I had two thoughts: The first was Damn, I would've loved to write a book with this storyline. The second was, I need to get this book.

I don't know why I was so excited.

For the first few pages, Bliss's narration jumps off the page. I didn't expect the flamboyant narration based on Ellen Page's quiet and somewhat nervous portrayal of Bliss in the film. After the opening chapters, though, the constant asides grew tiring and the flippant teenage slang grew tedious.

In fact, I discovered myself in the rare situation of liking the movie more than the book. The characters in the movie are more dimensional with more blue-collar-edge. The characters in the book? Flat, air-headed, unpredictable--and not in a good way. All the ingredients could add up to something amazing are here, but would Bliss, the star of the book, really buy into the ditzy, teenage lingo used endlessly? I think not. Bliss is supposed to be a clever, edgy, deep-thinking girl, but the narration makes you think she's more like her archnemesis Corbi than a smart, talented derby girl.

Cross wrote the screenplay for the movie. This isn't surprising as most of her writing projects are screenplays. However, it is surprising that the author of this novel could, with the help of director Drew Barrymore, create a much more compelling movie.

I'm just disappointed. This story could make such an amazing book. It didn't even come close.

Liralen says

Although I enjoyed this for the roller-derby aspect, I wasn't too keen on the execution. (It pains me to say this, ever, but the movie was better.) Bliss is sixteen, old enough to rebel against her parents but too young to do so effectively; when she discovers roller derby, that changes...sort of.

I'm on board with the idea, on board with books about roller derby,* on board with the contrast of pageant queens and derby girls. But I struggled to get behind Bliss, who rarely transcends 'bratty'; I wanted to see the roller derby fleshed out beyond *I was terrible for five minutes and then I was the best derby girl ever and everyone loved me*; I didn't buy the mother's transformation in the end. Fun? Yes. But much of it feels

unearned.

Ah well—quick read, and it's about roller derby, so I can't be sorry that I read it.

*Am too much of a wuss to do roller derby myself, but it's fantastic to watch. Unfortunately, I discovered right *after* I booked my flight for summer adventuring that the local league's season was about to start...with their first match scheduled for the same day I left town.

Mersini says

Ok, so it's not nearly as fantastic as the movie, but I loved the book. You can definitely see the similarities, and what I love about the film is that they've kept the tone of the book. Reading it, I could almost hear Ellen Page narrating the whole thing. In terms of adaptations, the film is spectacular!

The voice is quite unique, which I liked, though I felt some of the terms were outdated. Plus there is the whole "I'm not like other girls" element in there, which is super antifeminist (what's wrong with girls who love mainstream music and beauty pageants? Let them love life!). Also the pretentiousness of "real music" which is anything that isn't usually heard on the radio, or isn't any more recent than 1980. But if you ignore that, it's quite good. Bliss is quite an interesting character, and yet, real enough that you can identify with her emotions.

What I didn't like was her tendency to make everything into an acronym, particularly things she didn't say again. It's very irritating. And of course, I feel her slang is outdated, even though the book was only written in 2007. Having said that, I think this was intentional, to get the 'uncool' feel of small town Bodeen across, like it's stuck two decades behind the rest of the world.

I do think the film was better, playing up the emotions, the drama of roller derby, and how hard it is for Bliss to fit in in Bodeen, while finding a family in the Hurl Scouts, but the book certainly has merit, especially if you measure merit by how entertaining it is (which I do).
