



## Save Yourself

*Kelly Braffet*

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**Save Yourself** Kelly Braffet

**A gripping novel full of suspense and pathos that Dennis Lehane calls an "electrifying, tomahawk missile of a thriller."**

Patrick Cusimano's life can't get much worse. His father is in jail, he works the midnight shift at a grubby convenience store, and his brother's girlfriend, Caro, has pushed their friendship to an uncomfortable new level. On top of all that, he can't shake the attentions of Layla Elshere, a goth teenager who befriends Patrick for reasons he doesn't understand, and doesn't fully trust. The temptations these two women offer are pushing Patrick to his breaking point.

Meanwhile, Layla's little sister, Verna, is suffering through her first year of high school. She's become a prime target for her cruel classmates, and not just because of her strange name and her fundamentalist parents. Layla's bad-girl rep casts a shadow too heavy for Verna to bear alone, so she falls in with her sister's tribe of outcasts. But their world is far darker than she ever imagined...

Unless Patrick, Layla, Caro, and Verna can forge their own twisted paths to peace—with themselves, with each other—then they're stuck on a dangerous collision course where the stakes couldn't be higher.

Kelly Braffet has written a novel of unnerving power—darkly compelling, compulsively addictive, and shockingly honest.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## Save Yourself Details

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Author : Kelly Braffet

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## From Reader Review Save Yourself for online ebook

### Brenda says

Patrick and Mike Cusimano were finding that life after their alcoholic father had been sentenced to prison for the hit-and-run death of a child was much worse than they had imagined it would be – if they had even thought about it. But the misguided guilt that Patrick felt was made worse by the nineteen hour gap between finding the damaged and bloodied car in their garage and going to the police. The blame directed toward Mike and him was such that their lives were made very uncomfortable to say the least. The days the two men spent in a haze of alcoholic stupor were many.

Layla and Verna Elshere were children of parents who were deeply religious – they had been brought up with their father's Christianity from birth – when Layla was forced to run a campaign at her school, the end result caused a deep rebellion within her – and goth Layla was born. Verna at fourteen was struggling in school – she had been home-schooled until recently and the verbal and then physical abuse she was subjected to at the same school that Layla (occasionally) attended was horrendous.

Justinian, Layla's deeply goth friend and leader of their other group of friends gradually and insidiously took Verna under his wing – slowly changes began to happen within Verna. But were these changes that she wanted? She knew she wanted her sister back; she desperately wanted things the way they used to be – but could it ever be that way again?

I struggled with this book. Misguided loyalty, bullying, abuse, grief, anger, the uncertainty of teenage years – what a mixture! But three quarters of the way through it hit an even bigger low! I can't in all conscience, give this book a high rating, and I'm afraid I can't recommend it either.

With thanks to The Reading Room and the publisher for my copy to read and review.

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### Shelby \*trains flying monkeys\* says

Patrick and Mike's dad ran down a young boy. Drunk driving. They are now on their own and live with their own demons.

*Mike was strong and good-looking and he made her feel safe, but that wasn't the kind of thing he thought about. Patrick might have understood, but Caro thought Patrick had grown acclimated to misery, and even as he knew the beer cooler was poison he wouldn't have been able to get rid of it.*

This book was so personal for me. My dad spent 26 years in prison. I know that feeling of your demons eating you alive. I'm not throwing this into the review as a pity party. He is a great man and I'm proud to have him as my dad. I just know the feelings these kids are having.

Caro grew up with a mentally ill mom. She sleeps with too many men in order to just find someone that wants/needs her. She ends up as Mike's girlfriend.

*it was a nice thing for him to say, the sort of thing that always got to her. Caro needed to be important. It was boring and typical and transparent as hell, even to her, but she couldn't turn it off any more than she could quit having arms.*

Patrick works nights at a 7/11 type store and ends up kinda getting stalked by Layla. A goth type girl with so much going on in her head that I couldn't decide if I wanted to smack her or cry for her.

Her parents are those type parents who fight the school board to keep sex ed out of the school. Purity rings. The whole nine yards.

Her little sister Verna has so much to face starting high school. A sister that was involved with a favorite teacher that was involved in the sex-ed scandal, she is super religious, no friends other than her sister. The bullying in the book could be a trigger if you've ever been bullied. I wanted to smash and roar.

Little sister Verna gets involved in big sister Layla's world.

You have to read this book!!

Dark fiction at it's finest. I didn't know when I started reading this book that the author was Stephen King's daughter in law..What the heck is up with that family. Do they just ooze awesome in the pages they touch?

*I received a copy of this book from blogging for books in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Amy says**

Book: *Save Yourself*

Author: Kelly Braffet

Published: August 2013 by Crown, 320 pages

First Line: "Patrick worked the day shift at Zoney's GoMart one Wednesday a month: sealed into the vacuum-packed chill behind the convenience store's dirty plate-glass windows, watching cars zoom by on the highway while he stood still."

Genre/Rating: Literary fiction; 4/5 lost little girls dying their hair maroon and silver just to fit in somewhere...anywhere

Recommended if you like: Owen King, Gillian Flynn, Rick Moody, Peter Straub, books about people who are broken, Sofia Coppola movies

Review: Years ago, I read Kelly Braffet's *Last Seen Leaving*, and loved it. (I've always meant to read her other novel, *Josie and Jack*, and don't know why I haven't. I plan to rectify this soon.)

When early buzz started circulating about this book, I was interested. Very interested. See, Braffet understands what's at the heart of all of us: that we're scared. And we're broken. And we're trying like hell not to let anyone SEE how scared and broken we are, but we're not always successful. And it's at that place, where we're at our most broken, that we can either become something great, or we can completely fall apart; it's in our hands to go one way or the other.

Patrick and Mike's father killed a young boy in a drunken hit-and-run; they are now looked at with suspicion as the children of the town drunk. Mike greets this with a kind of blindness; he refuses to see any ugliness. Patrick, however, greets it with anger, with an inability to move on – and with an all-encompassing desire for his brother's girlfriend, Caro. Caro, in turn, is on the run from an unhappy childhood, and is torn between the two men, neither of whom can save her, but both of whom seem to need her to save them. Layla and Verna are children of the town's most vocal "home church leader" (think the kind of guy who gets the reproduction chapter cut out of the high school biology textbook); they are also terribly bullied at school because of this. Layla falls in with a group of goth kids, who seem to be her salvation, and brings Verna along for the ride.

These people, these lost, terrified, broken people, all circle each other like planets; they all bump into each other, randomly, like moths dangerously close to a flame. And there is flame. And people burn. They burn with longing and desire and hatred and insanity. You know, you just KNOW, that someone's going to go up in flames; you just don't know which character it will be. Angry Patrick, who seems to have given up? Fishnet-clad Layla, who's walking the knife's-edge between childhood and adulthood? Scared little Verna, who just wants so, so badly to belong, to be like her big sister, to have people stop calling her names and start seeing her for who she really is? Caro, with her dead-end job and her boyfriend who does very little but drink and watch sports all night long and talk sadly about the old days while looking through boxes of his incarcerated father's belongings?

I read this book like it was my job. It reads like a gorgeous indie film. I had to know what happened; I had to know if anyone got out of this, if anyone was able to pull themselves up and out of this dusty little town. Every time I had to go back to the real world I felt cheated. I lived among these people for the past few days. I rooted for them and I felt their disappointment and I cried on midnight back porches with them, the moon hanging high in the night sky turning a blind eye to everything going on down below.

Kelly Braffet understands the parts of us we hide from everyone else. Not only does she understand them, she shines a light on them until we almost understand them; until we can almost pin down where, exactly, those parts of us come from. And in understanding them, we might be able to overcome them.

(Originally published at Insatiable Booksluts)

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## Michael says

There must be something in the water that Stephen King's family is drinking.

King is currently in a bit of a second renaissance, producing some of the best work of his career. Then there's his son, Joe Hill, who with *Horns* and *NOS4A2* has rocketed onto my authors to watch list and earned the same distinction as his famous father of "I will read everything he writes."

Add to the list of talented authors in the King family tree, his daughter-in-law Kelly Braffet. Her latest novel *Save Yourself* wasn't just one of the best novels I've read all year. It was one of those books that is so good,

so absorbing and so utterly readable that it set unrealistic expectations for the next book or two I read to try and equal or top.

*Save Yourself* is kind of like watching a season of *Breaking Bad* on DVD or streaming. You keep telling yourself you'll just do one more chapter or episode, only to find yourself still going hours later, even though you've got other pressing things that need to be done like eat, sleep or continue to be gainfully employed.

Yes, *Save Yourself* is just that good.

And yet, it's not a story that you'll necessarily feel better about yourself or humanity as a whole after you're done reading. Packed with anti-heroes, the novel follows several threads all through to their inevitable and violent conclusion. Patrick Cusimano is facing some demons including a drinking habit, a dead-end job and the fact that he's in love with his brother's live in girlfriend. It doesn't help that Patrick and the girlfriend have slept together and that neither of them can stop thinking about their (what should have been) one time indiscretion.

Patrick's dead end job at the local convenience store brings him into contact with Layla, a goth wannabe who is rebelling against her ultra-Christian parents. Layla and her sister, Verna, are used by her father in promotional material for his family ministry. Verna is bullied at school while Layla has turned to rebelling through her clothes and lifestyle against her parents. That includes hooking up with several older guys, including Patrick.

Braffet ably and compellingly weaves together her plot threads and builds each character up as the novel winds its way to its inevitable and devastating conclusion. As I said before, this novel is next to impossible to put down, despite the fact that there are few redeeming qualities to any of the characters Braffet has created.

Simply put, this is one of the best novels I've read in a long, long time. Pick it up, read the first two chapter and then just try to put it down. If you're like me, you won't be able to.

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## Rafe says

I read this in one long sitting this afternoon. I am now tired and sad.

*Save Yourself* is one of the saddest books I've ever read - the tragedy comes from the relentlessness of the sorrow. The reader spends time in the heads of three characters - Patrick, Verna, and Caro - and each is drawn with compassion and intelligence. It's about small people in a small town, whose decisions turn everything inside out. It might be more accurate to say that it's everyone's dithering that causes the problems, but in fact the book is a weird haze of people being paralyzed by sadness until they do something desperately stupid because either they want to feel something or they believe the wrong person. This book has been compared a lot with *Gone Girl* and *Breaking Bad*, but I thought it was about nine thousand times more tragic than either of those, and also much better. It was, I suppose, a lot more Dreiser than Flynn.

And then it gets worse.

Everything that happens is wholly believable, which is kind of awful, because one ends the book wanting to take a shower and go look at pictures of kittens. Most of the book is just grim and gritty, a sad story about

sad people from a miserable little city in Pennsylvania, but near the end the precipice on which Braffet has stranded her readers gives way, and BAM everything gets SO MUCH WORSE. There is a tinge of melodrama in the awful things that happen in the last part of the book (and particularly in the ringleader of the horrible things), and while I believed them, I wasn't pulled in quite as deeply as I had been for the rest of the book. Still and all, though, I certainly didn't stop reading. I couldn't.

Poor Patrick. And poor Caro. And poor Verna.

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## **Jordan says**

Kelly Braffet's *Save Yourself* will eat at you. It's dark, it's brutal, and it doesn't quit. It only tightens its grip on your windpipe like a python, squeezing harder and harder, tighter and tighter until it reaches its breaking point. And when you do reach its end, it won't leave you feeling great, but it will make you feel better for having read it.

There's Patrick, who works the overnight shift at the convenience store, Zoney's, who quit his previous job because he couldn't take the whispers and stares from the people around him after his dad killed a kid in a drunken hit and run; there's Verna, incoming high school freshman, who's struggling to find her way, especially since she's having to contend with her older sister Layla's reputation as the teen goth sexpot, and their dad as the town's religious mouthpiece; and Caro, who's worked all over the country waitressing tables, battling demons no matter where she goes, and now lives with the much-looked down upon Cusimano brothers, one of whom is her boyfriend, the other who she's finding more and more drawn to, and who's room is just down the hall.

It's not often that a novel focuses on the mundane. But here, it does. Each of the featured characters' lives are so affected by a previous experience outside of their control; a family member, in some way --that they're tied to-- knowingly or not, set them on path outside their choosing. And Braffet depicts this well. It takes place in a shitty suburb outside of Pittsburgh, and we're shown ordinary scenery through Patrick's isolated late-night and early morning walks to and from his meaningless job; the familiarity of the local dive bar; and the narrow-mindedness of the stereotypical small town folk that they would rather avoid than have to interact with. Routines are emphasized -- the cop who comes in for the Snickers bar; Mike's beer cooler next to the recliner for his after work television watching; Layla's drive-by's; and the high school's loading dock meet-up spot. Braffet's world is not an exciting one, but that's what she wants --and it only serves her story for the better. She has her characters live and operate in this endless purgatory on Earth, where everyday offers the same terrible existence, and they've come to accept it, and in a way, grown to believe that they deserve it.

But not only that, some of the things that happen to them, and that they put themselves through, is devastating. And at the same time, you understand these motivations. It's why that when these things do happen, it hits you like a bag of bricks. You finish the chapter, set the book down, and take a breath. Patrick's desire for love. Layla's self-destruction. Verna's need to find her way. Mike's want of normalcy. Caro's urge for stability and happiness. And yeah, it's relatable, but Braffet sets the stage skillfully as well.

And man... Layla just KILLS me. The only thing that I wish was different was that final, short chapter. [SPOILER] I like that Patrick and Verna got to have a conversation. However, I just wanted Patrick to show a little more empathy than he did. Because, yes, he was being honest with her. But at the same time, I think that he cared about Layla --at least a little bit. It would've been nice if he could've shown it there.

It's an unsettling little story. Be prepared for it to sit in your gut days after you've finished.

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## Aly's Bookish Wonderland says

It's not about danger, it's about control. Keep people scared and stupid and you can make them do anything you want.

*This book.* Once upon a time, Kelly Braffet blew me away with her book *Josie and Jack*. It had left me tied up in knots and book-hungover for days. Braffet has a way of screwing with your head in the subtlest ways possible. Although some people compare her to Gillian Flynn, the latter author is more direct in screwing with your head. Braffet, on the other hand, does it subtly. Things you think don't matter will play a huge role in the outcome of the story; **characters you want to tear apart are characters you will cry for in the end.**

There's **Patrick**. He who called the police on his father when the old man killed a kid in a drink-driving hit-and-run. He who hit a deer one night driving home from work, and decided to let his car rust in the drive rather than using it again. He who sleeps with a seventeen year old because she pursued him and wouldn't leave him alone. He who sleeps with his brother's girlfriend because she walked into his room one night, and didn't leave. **Patrick is the sort of character you want to hate, because he's a million different types of wrong. Yet, he turns out to be the sort of character who is so stuck, so alone, so desperate, that you want to hug and tell him everything will be alright.**

There was no poetry in death. People died because they were animals and all animals died. Sometimes they got cancer and sometimes they were hit by cars and sometimes they just stopped breathing. And sometimes they slept with their brothers' girlfriends.

He's being relentlessly pursued by seventeen year old goth-girl Layla. She won't take no for an answer, no matter how hard Patrick pushes her away. Layla, who had once been the perfect minister's daughter, is all kinds of screwed up.

Staring at him through thickly painted eyelashes, she said, "You're Patrick Cusimano. Your dad was the one who killed Ryan Czerpak."

The word "cult" is never used in *Save Yourself*, but Layla's life outside of home is exactly that: she's part of a screwed up cult, in so deep she can't get out. Instead of fighting for herself, she accidentally drags her sister into it too. They're under Justin's thumb. Verna had once been a good kid, the good daughter everyone relied



on ever since Layla went so haywire. Soon, she's following her sister's footsteps, and she can't stop.

"... Layla is the child of sin, and you're the child of God. Layla was born when your parents were still in high school, right? And your parents used to be metalheads. I'll be they drank, did drugs, all of it. Then they got saved, and then they had you. So Layla's named after a Clapton song, and you're named after the woman who told them about Jesus."

Layla wants Patrick because she can see herself in him. She wants to save him, and believes he can save her.

"People are messed up. You give them a chance to vent their sad little rage at their sad little lives, to feel morally superior, or powerful, or whatever, and they take it. They don't care who you are or what you've done. They just care that it's socially acceptable to hate you in public." Layla reached out and ran her fingers over his temple and through his hair, where it curled behind his ear. "I think you need me. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

And her younger sister, Verna, sick of the bullying, sick of being the outcast no matter how hard she tries, is desperate to be like Layla. She will do anything, follow her anywhere, as long as she's a part of something... including straight into psycho Justin's arms.

Thou shalt not stand out by wearing the wrong clothes, the way Verna did the day she wore a long flowered dress that her mother had made and Calleigh called her the Little Whore on the Prairie. Thou shalt not stand out by having a father who'd threatened to take the school board to court. Thou shalt not stand out by having a strange name. Like, for instance, Verna Elshere. Hey, Venereal, I'd tell you to suck my dick, but I don't want to catch anything.

The hold Justin has on Layla and Verna and the other members of their "group" is astonishing. At first, I liked him: he seemed like one of those misunderstood guys that everyone mocks in school because he doesn't wear the right clothes, or doesn't have the right haircut or because he has bad skin. But as the story unfolded, the stuff I thought had been a joke ("Oh yeah, they're Goths so it's stereotypical that they talk about practicing vampirism, right?") turned out to be only one of the fucked up things Justin did to those girls.

"At first he just made little cuts, like on my arm. But he didn't want people seeing the scars. So he started on other places." Her fingers reached down, touched the gashes lightly. Caressing them, almost. "It used to be okay. But now it's never enough. There's always a new experience I need to have or a new emotion I need to feel. I need to be tied up so I understand freedom, I need to fuck his friend who hates me so I understand love, I need to let him hurt me so I

understand pleasure."

And poor Patrick. He's the character I really felt sorry for. In love with his brother's girlfriend, forever trying to repair the rift between himself and Mike since he'd called the police on their alcoholic father, and fending off the advances of a goth teenager who wouldn't leave him alone.

and all the while that loathsome part of him was back in his bedroom reliving that blow job, standing on the street feeling her hand on his cock. That part of him wished he'd pulled the sheets away from her instead of covering her. The rest of him would have liked to hit that part of him with a brick until it stopped moving, and then dump the corpse in the nearest and deepest body of water.

Since the beginning, you feel the story tighten up, building towards something and you know that whatever's about to happen, it's going to be **bad**. These characters, their flaws, their stories, wanted to make me reach into the book and somehow save them. *Save Yourself* is what happens when good things go bad, and those bad things are shoved under the rug, and how sometimes, life will punch you with a brick because why the fuck not. By the time the ending came, I was so wound up that it shocked me right out of my seat. 'No,' I kept thinking, 'Oh, for fuck's sake, *no*.'

"Layla strayed from us. She lost faith. After all this time, you'd think she'd know how the world treats people like us, but I guess sometimes you have to learn a lesson over and over before you truly know it."

"Wait," Criss said, and Eric said, "What did she do?"

"She let one of them contaminate her," Justinian said.

There was another pause. Then, "Fuck her, you mean," Eric said and looked at Layla. "Whore."

Layla sat up straighter and glared at Eric, some of her old nerve asserting itself. "Right. You hate when I fuck other guys, unless of course it's you."

"You were a whore when I fucked you, too."

This story isn't just about Patrick, Layla and Verna. It's about Layla and Verna's parents, Mike, Caro (Mike's girlfriend). It's about the little background stories and how every single thing, every single moment, counts towards something bigger.

"... It came to me in a dream last night. We were in the clearing, all of us, drinking from you. Like tonight, except at the same time." He paused. The sorrow in his voice was convincing and, numbly, Verna wondered if, on some level, Justinian was truly sad.

"In the dream," he said. "I was making love to you as your heart stopped. It was beautiful. I woke up crying."

4.5 stars. Hot damn, I love Braffet. I want to quote the entire book.

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### **Autumn says**

The publish date on this book is a while off, but I picked this book up and couldn't put it down. I was really impressed by it. I've been in a bit of an "actual book" reading slump for awhile. I've been tearing through audiobooks like crazy, but when it comes to an actual book in hand, nothing has held my interest in quite awhile. The little blurb about this book said it was like Gillian Flynn and Donald Ray Pollock, and I happen to enjoy the darkness of both of those writers so I was really interested in reading this book.

Save Yourself tells the intertwining stories of Patrick and Layla. Patrick is stuck in a dead end job in a town where everyone knows his family's terrible story. He is the son of an alcoholic that killed a boy while drunk driving, and he turned his own father in to the police, but not fast enough for the town's forgiveness. Layla is a preacher's daughter gone goth and fallen under the spell of a sadistic psychopath. Layla is dragging her perfectly obedient little sister down with her and gets Patrick involved in all of their drama as well.

I read almost this entire book in one sitting. If it wasn't like 2 am and I wasn't utterly exhausted I would have stayed up and read the whole thing. Next day, I flew through the rest of it. I loved this book. It was the first book by Kelly Braffet I've read, and I'll will definitely be adding her name to the list of authors to keep an eye out for.

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### **Patrice Hoffman says**

I haven't read any book recently that I can recall that has as many seriously messed up people as this one does. Patrick, Layla, Mike, Caro, and Verna all live in the small town of Ratchetsburg, PA. Their lives intersect because of another even worse psycho. Enough about that.

Save Yourself begins with recounting the circumstances of Patrick's life. The son of a murderer. His father killed a boy while driving drunk. The town won't let Patrick forget that he and his brother Mike, need to pay for not reporting the crime sooner. The religious zealots, I mean parents of the dead Czerpak boy, want them to pay with everything physical that they have. Not only are his problems stemming from his father going to maybe leave him homeless, he's got quite crush on his brother's girlfriend, Caro. While on shift at Zoney's, a 7-Eleven type place, Patrick meets Layla.

Layla was once a semi-normal teenager, with the overbearing, religious phanatical parents. We meet her as the coffin ring wearing, totally gothed out 17 year old who is drawn to Patrick for some reason. Maybe she feels sorry for him, or maybe she just wants to piss off Daddy. She's abandoned her life as a bible-toting nut for practices in sadism, masochism, and any other crazy -ism there is. Her younger sister Verna seems to be following that path.

No longer interested in being called Venereal or bullied at school, the last hope of Layla's parents, Verna, begins to search for truth and understanding in places beyond her Bible. She slowly tries to transform into a person that is better equipped at handling the teasing and bad behavior from classmates. She looks to her sister's newfound independence and group of friends in an effort to save herself.

These people all are searching for something, although they aren't quite sure what it is. We readers only know that they are all stuck in a rut and no one quite knows what to do to get themselves out. The sister's think they found their answer in a group of people that claim to have the answers to enlightenment.

Kelly Braffet does a great job at making this novel dark from the beginning to the end. There's always some sense of tension. I will admit to being quite bored with the middle of the book. I didn't know where this was leading or what the purpose of the book was. All the characters seem so unstable that the plots plateau could be supplied by any of them. I was very shocked by the ending but wondered for the whole time does no one have a cell phone.

Essentially, I'd be interested in reading more by Kelly Braffet. This is my introduction to her writing and it's all right. The plot is intelligent and the characters more than interesting. There's depth to all the characters introduced with no unnecessary characters coming in just for the sake of making the novel lengthier. Save Yourself is a quick read that I'm sure fans of dark fiction will enjoy.

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### **Ellen Gail says**

Holy. Shit.

Do me a favor.

Drive out away from the city and find yourself an isolated patch of countryside, away from streetlights and cars. Wait for night to fall. Look up at the night sky. Look at alllllll those 500 kajillion stars chilling up there. See those?

I'm hereby awarding every single one of those (stars, fireflies, great kings of the past, whatever) to this book.

Bravo. I think I'm broken.

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### **Aaron Clark says**

Best book I've read all summer (maybe this year). Prepare to squirm in your seat as the tension builds. You won't be able to keep still throughout the last 75 pages. Kelly Braffet is genius and I've loved her since day one.

Also-make sure to ignore the generic "blurb" (which reads like a blurb for some run-of-the-mill cliched-type YA fiction). Although Braffet's characters are often in their teens/twenties (see Josie and Jack also), this is straight up dark fiction at its best. Braffet has an originality that is superior and unmatched, and she seamlessly breaks free of any predetermined molds.

Recommended without reservation.

--Most importantly, I've been going on Goodreads for over two years now and this is the first book I've had

the urge to recommend. That should tell you something. Definitely a solid 4.8, although I can't completely account for the missing .2 stars.

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### **Adrianne Mathiowetz says**

Pure entertainment with no meaty reward. You will learn nothing from this book, about humanity, or yourself, or timespace, or plants, even, you definitely won't learn anything about plants. The writing is perfectly adequate without ever being beautiful. You will continue to turn the pages in a kind of ambivalent horror, wondering what could possibly happen next, and that is the biggest selling point of this book -- its plot darts unpredictably like a frightened or possibly rabid animal, and you can't help but be cast under the spell of its savageness.

But, in the end, the animal bites your hand, poops itself, and flops into the dust, and suddenly you're standing there in the woods wondering if someone's been waiting for you to come home, all this time -- if there had been some better conversation to be had elsewhere.

I will not lie; I totally enjoyed this book.

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### **Cody | codysbookshelf says**

This is going to be a hard review to write, and that's not because Kelly Braffet's *Save Yourself* is bad -- quite the opposite, in fact. It's so good that I feel like any attempt on my part to sum up the book and talk about the feelings it stirred within me would do nothing but undermine the story and the characters and the struggles they go through. Still, I'll try to press on but it's gonna be a short one -- I'll give myself just enough rope to hang myself with, nothing more and nothing less.

*Save Yourself* opens on a note of despair and doesn't get much more optimistic from there. Mike and Patrick, brothers in equally menial and mindless jobs, are the sons of a drunkard who hit and killed a local kid and is now doing time in jail. For this, they are social pariahs and just try to do their best to get through each day. They live together in their parents' home (side-note: their mother passes away due to cancer a year before the story's happenings) with Mike's girlfriend, Caro, making ends meet and not much more. They are living, but not existing. Mike is content with this, but Patrick isn't. He longs for more, but he can't crawl out from under the long shadow his father's reputation has cast. To make matters worse, he and Caro have drunken sex early on in the novel while Mike is away, and things only get more depressing and awkward from there.

In another part of town, a teen-aged girl named Layla and her group of friends participate in ritualistic activities (not wanting to go into spoiler city here) and her younger sister, Verna, is just trying to get by in her first year of high school. These girls are the daughters of extremely conservative evangelists who became well-known after they caused a big stink because the high school was teaching sex education. It became a big thing because that's how small towns work -- small things turn into big things. For this, Verna is mercilessly bullied by classmates to the point that I felt physically sick at times while reading what she had to go through.

These two stories eventually merge into one, leading to a thrilling (and very rushed) climax. It's truly exciting to see the way Braffet sets her characters up only to knock each other down . . . and when they get

up again, you hope they'll stay up but deep in your heart you know they won't. Ah, tragedy.

Perhaps Braffet's biggest strength here is her character work. This woman is only three novels into her career, but she writes people like she's been doing it for at least a decade. Characters that should have been paper-thin cliches, such as Layla's gothic friends or the girls' parents, come off as totally believable and real - like people you'd live next door to or meet on the street. That's a major sign of a talented author -- making the reader genuinely care about the people on the page. Oh boy, does Kelly Braffet ever accomplish that! As I said, at times I felt physically sick when reading about Verna being bullied. I winced when she cut off and dyed her hair to fit in with her older sister's group of friends. I felt for Mike, suspecting that Caro was cheating on him but not realizing it was with his own brother. I could see myself as Patrick, Layla, Caro, Justinian, all of them. Braffet made me believe in these characters so deeply that I became them.

So, why doesn't this novel earn 5 stars from me? Well, as I mentioned earlier, the climax and resolution felt way too rushed for me. It seems like Braffet was ready to finish the novel and put it aside, which is a real shame -- she has created some outstanding characters and situations here, and could have gotten even more mileage out of 'em. Still, I suppose it's better to be left wanting more than wishing the author had chopped off fifty or a hundred pages. What we're left with is a novel that's just over 300 pages and touches on every genre from comedy to horror to young adult fiction. Not bad, that.

In conclusion: READ THIS BOOK. You won't regret it.

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## Ash Wednesday says

### 4 STARS

Who made God's washing machine?

Who made the pointy things that stuck in God's feet?

Let's draw comparisons as a jump off point for this one. This book was like that movie *Love Actually* without the Wet Wet Wet Christmas and with every character living out their own personal versions of hell, taking a trajectory without any conceivable escape. I think I was expecting something along the lines of R-rated Courtney Summers or Hannah Harrington but ended up feeling like I read an exploded, novelization of Soundgarden's *Black Hole Sun*. Which is all sorts of fucked up, intense, discordant and crazy and will hopefully put off those who get offended by cheating (between siblings no less), statutory rape, underaged sex, bullying, animal cruelty (those poor lobsters!), cults and high school violence. But you, yes you with an appreciation for all things taboo, miserable and dysfunctional characters, you and Chris Cornell will have a field day with this one.

*Save Yourself* is about two families living in the polar opposites of a town that sounds suspiciously like those TV/movie towns where law enforcement exists in the periphery, and only comes in when the protagonists have already made a mess of themselves. So yes, hell.

Living in the shadows of the crime committed by their father years ago, the Cusimanos are Ratchetsburg's pariahs, reducing Mike and Patrick to nothing more than the sons of an alcoholic child killer. The brothers try to carry on, strive for some semblance of normalcy with Caro, Mike's girlfriend who lives with them in the very house where their family's demise began. But the town is long on the forgetting and forgiving department. While Mike chooses optimistic oblivion, Patrick carries the burden of being the one to call the

police on their father all those years ago. He ends up committing the Great Apocalyptic Mistake of sleeping with Caro and because that's not enough fun for one plate, he eventually gets entangled with a seventeen year-old goth stalker, Layla Elshere.

Verna Elshere is a high school freshman, stepping in to a life bearing the shadows cast by her sister Layla. They are daughters of a basement minister, the good kind of girls who wear Ruby Promise rings, pray to God and loves everybody. When once Layla was ridiculed to being a Jesus kind of girl, she got worse and widespread abuse from school when she inadvertently kicked off the publicised battle of her father's worship group against sex education. This leads Layla to lash out against her parents and the world at large, finding shelter and acceptance instead in the fringe goth group led by a charismatic and mysterious boy Justinian. The same boy Verna's growing more and more drawn to as the harsh reality of high school continue to punish her for Layla's perceived faults.

Alone in her bedroom, Verna was Bathsheba. She was the Whore of Babylon. She was all four of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, she was Salome, she was the Beast, she was the apple. She was one of the nameless children who died in Sodom when fire and brimstone rained down the sky.

I've read a lot of edgy authors (for the first time) this year but very few actually impressed me quite as much as Kelly Braffet. At the end of the book, she provided the short story (*Hung Up*) from which this novel was based from and it was quite interesting to see the bare skeleton from which this was moulded from. I thought it was brilliant, how well placed the meat and flesh she added on to make it into a novel, because in my humblest opinion, this was some piece of work. One that was disturbing and awkward and depressing delivered with impressive control and depth. It did take me a while to piece together half of the story with the other, connect the dots and find the underlying pulse where this was coming from. And to be honest, I'm still not quite sure I've made every crevice, figured each nook and cranny of hurt and structured anger this made me feel. Because for a stretch the switching perspectives between Patrick, Caro and Verna were independently powerful but the overall picture was hard to discern for me. Each had its own charm that made you want to savour each chapter, not quite ready to yield the reins back to the other third of the narrative while also excited to pick up the other loose thread, dread and excitement simultaneously preventing you from looking anywhere else but forward.

It was THAT kind of a read.

The kind that made you involved for each character's arc. The kind that will make you want to slap and hug these people. It was atmospheric, pervading and tangibly familiar: the smell of loss and defeat wafts through the pages and it smells like a high school bathroom and a convenience store at midnight, while hope and comfort smells like scotch tape. I ended up having a headache after putting this down because it's been a while since words have punched me so effectively in the gut, the powerlessness of the characters so potent that it transports you to a place that's familiar: harrowingly nightmarish and real.

All she had ever wanted was a world she could count on and every time she thought she had it somebody took it away from her, somebody kicked her out or traded her in or walked away without a word. She never learned. Nothing ever changed.

I've read my share of disturbing but this just upped the bar a little higher. You know how awful high school

can be? You may just know a little more with this one. And you might have some preconceived notions about this book, some expectations when your interest was piqued with the brotherly cheating and all those things I listed above. I don't think one would be disappointed but I don't think it would be anything one would expect either.

For all its triumphs, I thought this book ended rather abruptly, tying some ends haphazardly and not tying some at all. (view spoiler)Layla being the hinge character that joins both half of the story felt a little too volatile and disjointed from the character in her world and Patrick's world.. It could be argued its a facet of her personal conflict, of a troubled teen working out the kinks of her angst and the consequences of her choices and I suppose I'm reluctantly willing to accept that as an excuse. And I thought the last few climactic chapters lacked a certain degree of urgency. Justinian, who gave off such an intense and brilliant Jim Jones vibe, lacked the necessary weight and punch in the threat department that all that rapid-fire intensity felt a little dulled and muffled.

I swore I wasn't going to talk too much about this book because it's really one of those that will take you for a ride if you let it.

And I do hope you let it.

*Review Copy courtesy of the publishers thru BloggingForBooks.*

Also on Booklikes.

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## **karen says**

this book surprised me, in a good way. i don't know what i thought it was going to be, but i definitely wasn't expecting what i got. and i like that i can still be surprised by books, this far along in my reading career.

it's the story of two brothers, patrick and mike, whose father is in jail after he killed a little boy when he was driving drunk. it's the story of mike's live-in girlfriend caro, whose desperate trapped boredom in her housewife-without-the-ring life leads her into patrick's bed one night. it's the story of layla and verna, two sisters whose ultra-religious parents (no sex ed in *this* school, kids!) lead them into typical teenage rebellion that quickly escalates into a dangerous place when they come under the sway of a charismatic and sociopathic boy. but mostly it's the story of how quickly things can spin out of control when impulsive decisions are made without considering or understanding the motivations or expectations of others. especially when people are as fucked up as the characters in this book.

i said i was surprised with this book, and i meant not only that i was surprised by the story's arc, which i was, but what most surprised me was where my sympathies as a reader ended up, and also with how subtly and perfectly patrick's character was written. you would think i would have felt the most affection for the 17-year-old gothed out lolita/layla, but for her i felt pity and dismay, with no love at all. caro was my favorite, and she managed to redeem the name for me - a still-young waitress who comes home defeated every night smelling of fish to tend house for two overgrown boys without ambition or prospects for excitement

*And even as she thought that, Mike was in the kitchen, wasn't he, filling up the red cooler that lived next to the armchair in the living room with beer. She could hear the clatter of ice, the muted clink of beer cans.*



*Caro hated that cooler. The uncleanable (she'd tried) pebbled surface of the thing, the old man's name written in huge Magic Marker letters on the side; the way that Mike sometimes came home with a bag of ice and a case of beer and she would instantly know that once again they were going nowhere, once again they were staying exactly where they were.*

that cooler, *leaching a steady, constant trickle of despair*, made me sadder than almost anything in this book. and caro's exhausted brave face in her circumstances quivered my cold black heart.

but the real star here was the atmosphere. she captured the small hopelessness of the town perfectly, with its molasses-futility of existing without living. its tone reminded me a lot of out of the furnace, which was a very mediocre movie with a great cast, but whose strength is its powerful sense of location; a dying town whose inhabitants are trapped in their small lives going nowhere, day after day.

utterly bleak and nearly perfect.

my only real complaint is that layla doesn't read like the same character in "her" chapters as she does in the patrick or verna chapters. and it's not simply a matter of different perspectives - her dialogue and actions just don't mesh, even with the latitude i allow for the naturally inconsistent behavior of a troubled teenage girl still trying to figure out who she is.

but quibble, quibble. this is a great one, particularly for someone like me, who skews dark.

read it and weep.

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## **Lou says**

Prepare yourself for a poetic inferno of a ride.

This author has successfully created an inferno here on earth amidst people, characters you know and see everyday, characters whom whilst not quite understanding the real deal trapped in a vicious circle of love, pain, submission and rebellion.

Betrayal, murder, revenge, ties that bond with serious consequences, parents failing their kids, parents that want control and order, others that had lost it, young girls, sisters in rebellion whom want to understand each other and find someone who attains control over them, this someone insidiously spins a web and has them seeing things very foggily.

In this seat of power lays Justinian, he seeks to have those around him find pleasure through pain and power through submission and wisdom through doing stupid things.

The author has you total immersed in these believable characters she has cast, tied in viscerally with great writing, sentencing, and the dying need to know how they all end up in their little bubble of finding themselves through the lies, betrayal and darkness.

A story that will have you thoroughly satisfied in what being caught up in a great tale was once like.

One for the must reads of 2013 list.

“Here, with Justinian and his people, was the only place she would ever feel safe again.”

”I’m not normal. I’m not like them. I’m like you. This is where I belong.”

Review also @ <http://more2read.com/review/save-yourself-by-kelly-braffet/>

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### **Melissa says**

This could quite possibly inspire a "deliciously melodramatic" shelf, simply so it could be the single (so far) star of the show, or perhaps as Kelly's review suggests, a "psycho goth teen" shelf. I didn't have a whole lot of expectations going in but I was pleasantly surprised by the twists & turns here, particularly those concerning said psycho goth teens.

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### **Kelly (and the Book Boar) says**

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

3.5 Stars

***"Families were like oceans. You never knew what was under the surface, in the parts you hadn't seen."***

The Cusimano family consists of brothers Patrick and Mike (whose greatest claim to fame is having an incarcerated father who was jailed for killing a little boy while driving drunk), and Mike's live-in girlfriend, Caro. The Elshere family is comprised of sisters Layla and Verna and their "God Warrior" parents. When Layla begins pseudo-stalking Patrick, the two families' paths will cross in some very twisted ways.

I'm going to blame the blurb for making me drop the rating a bit on this one. Once again, this is **not** comparable to anything by Gillian Flynn. Flynn makes you buckle up on Page 1 in order to take you on a rollercoaster ride of mindfuckery that will leave you reeling months after you've finished her stories. This book will not do that.

If I had to choose an author to compare Braffet to, it would be S.E. Hinton. *Save Yourself* is a book that could potentially have been categorized as a YA and would easily be banned from schools if it were, just like Hinton's stories. The subject matter was current and relevant and the main characters were people you really wanted to root for, but realized early on they might not be able to be saved.

This book has no mystery to solve and the characters you hate are characters you are supposed to hate. It's just about life . . . No, not even that – it's just about *existing*. It's about being poor and from fucked up families and being bullied (real bullying that makes you contemplate suicide) and probably having a case of some seriously untreated PTSD due to your upbringing and repeating the past and having no future to look forward to. It's bleak and it's written with a brutal honesty that hits you like a punch to the gut and makes it hard to regain your breath.

And to top it all off, you won't really feel better at the end.

*"Life shouldn't be so fucking hard, you shouldn't have to give so fucking much up."*

At most, you can only hope that the Cusimanos and Elsheres somehow find a way to "stay gold" . . .

*This book was provided by Blogging for Books in exchange for an honest review*

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### **Elaine says**

I finished this book last night as I just could not put it down as it raced towards an unpredictable climax. Although not an easy read with themes that were quite dark and depressing, it was compelling. It did seem to bring out a lot of raw emotions and there were times I cringed and others when I felt, just like the characters that I was struggling to breathe. I felt both empathy and despair for Layla, Patrick and Verna and as awful as it is to admit it rage and anger towards Justinian, Eric and Layla's parents. The characters and their relationships were quite dysfunctional and destructive. I did feel there was bit of hope at the end but this may be open to your own interpretation. This book may not be everyone's "cup of tea" but for me it showed the horrible side of human nature, the cruelty that can exist and the way certain decisions can spiral a life out of control. A 3.5 star read for me.

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### **Mollie says**

It wasn't until about three quarters of the way through this book that a light bulb went on for me: wait. This isn't some coming of age novel with redemption and learning at the end. This is a sick, twisted novel that preys on everyone within it. I didn't know much of anything about this book going in (obviously) and I wonder how different my opinion would be if I did. As it was, I felt cheated and misled.

*\*Spoilers\**

The fact that the goth kids are really the evil, fucked up blood-sucking (OH COME ON YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME) followers of a sociopath was the icing on the cake for me. Seriously. I thought this was going to have some intelligent insights into bullying and its consequences but no. It just took the stupidest, silliest way out. Ugh.

Layla was problematic throughout the novel, as well. To be as sexually aggressive as she was with Patrick (a problematic theme unto itself) while at the same time captivated by Justinian rang false. Verna seemed a much more realistic character.

All that being said, I did think this was well-written. I was impressed by the inconsistencies in the descriptors of the characters from different perspectives (i.e. was Patrick shrew-like and greasy or good-looking if a bit lanky? Was Caro cool, clean, and gorgeous or frumpy and unsophisticated?). I feel like that is a hard thing to

with subtlety and Braffet did it really well. It made the characters evolve and shift in my own imagination and I found it quite powerful: much more powerful than the stock characters (Justinian, Criss, Mike) changing (or not, AT ALL) with such violence.

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