



# The Way We Bared Our Souls

*Willa Strayhorn*

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**The Way We Bared Our Souls** Willa Strayhorn

**If you could trade your biggest burden for someone else's, would you do it?**

Five teenagers sit around a bonfire in the middle of the New Mexico desert. They don't know it yet, but they are about to make the biggest sacrifice of their lives.

**Lo** has a family history of MS, and is starting to come down with all the symptoms.

**Thomas**, a former child soldier from Liberia, is plagued by traumatic memories of his war-torn past.

**Kaya** would do anything to feel physical pain, but a rare condition called CIP keeps her numb.

**Ellen** can't remember who she was before she started doing drugs.

**Kit** lost his girlfriend in a car accident and now he just can't shake his newfound fear of death.

When they trade totems as a symbol of shedding and adopting one another's sorrows, they think it's only an exercise.

But in the morning, they wake to find their burdens gone...and replaced with someone else's.

As the reality of the ritual unfolds, this unlikely group of five embarks on a week of beautiful, terrifying experiences that all culminate in one perfect truth: In the end, your soul is stronger than your burdens.

## The Way We Bared Our Souls Details

Date : Published January 22nd 2015 by Razorbill

ISBN : 9781595147356

Author : Willa Strayhorn

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Genre : Young Adult, Contemporary, Fantasy, Magical Realism

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# From Reader Review *The Way We Bared Our Souls* for online ebook

Cait • A Page with a View says

"And then I was dancing. Something in the air - maybe smoke, maybe gold - compelled me to move. There, in the desert, in the daylight, all by myself, with no music, I danced. So Kaya's spirit would find peace, I danced. So we would all be kinder, more accepting of our differences, and of our own faults, I danced. So we would not just destroy each other, but instead open our eyes to the miracle of being alive, of being so similar, even in our suffering, I danced. The smoke and the fire and the blood and the light were all in my body, and I lifted my arms to the sky with grief and with joy."

"I thought about how I used to read energy as music and think people were different strains of the same song. Somewhere along the way I'd stopped listening. I'd had to block it all out because it was too much.

Man, this book has some beautiful moments. I wasn't terribly into it as a whole because some parts were rather dull and dragged... but I REALLY loved the parts I got into! 3.5 stars overall.

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Ashleigh says

*The Way We Bared Our Souls* follows Lo, a girl living in New Mexico, who believes she has the onset of MS, a condition that her aunt passed away from a few months prior. She's been experiencing the early symptoms of it, but is terrified of facing the truth, so has been hiding her pain from everyone around her. After a mysterious meeting with a Native American man, Jay, and his pet coyote, Dakota, she agrees to take part in a ceremony involving some 'magic', that she hopes will take away her pain. The only catch is she needs to bring along 4 friends who also have burdens that they will like to get rid of.

So our gang of misfits joining Lo are as follows: Kit, Lo's next door neighbour, and one-time boyfriend, who is suffering from depression after his girlfriend was killed in a car accident; Thomas, Lo's mysterious crush and former child soldier from Liberia who's been struggling to adjust since being adopted by American missionaries; Ellen, Lo's friend who has been spiralling out of control for some time, and has a pretty heavy addiction to drugs; and Kaya, Lo's former best friend who has been living a very sheltered life as she has a condition where she cannot feel pain, at all.

After agreeing to take part in the ceremony, the gang is shocked to find that their burdens have been swapped, and they have to live in each other's shoes for a week, until the swap can be reversed..

So while I did somewhat enjoy this book, I had some issues with it. First of all, I feel like this story was very heavy handed on whole 'we all have burdens and you don't know what someone else is experiencing until you walk in their shoes' blah blah blah etc. Secondly, there was a huge plot point that takes place at the end

of the book (but it's mentioned in the first chapter), and it wasn't handed very well. It was a huge thing that happened, and the reaction was basically, well that sucks, but it's okay, our lives are not majorly affected in any way despite the fact it should!! But yeah, after we sleep on it, we'll be fine and life goes on. What?

Despite that little niggle, it was an okay contemporary read with hints of magical realism. Just.. okay.

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## **Daniella (Reading With Daniella) says**

The second I saw this cover, I knew I needed to have this book! It was just so beautiful. And when I read the synopsis, I knew that I REALLY NEEDED to read the book! The story sounded absolutely incredible, but after completing the book, I'm sorry to say that I'm a little disappointed. It had so much potential, but it fell short.

I didn't hate it, but it wasn't great.

First of all, the first chapter of the book takes place near the end of the story line. I found this to be rather confusing and it would have made a whole lot more sense if the book just began from the beginning of the storyline (Chapter 2).

Also, the book started out a little bit slow and I found myself having to push through the first few chapters.

But I think that my biggest problem was (view spoiler)

I also didn't really love the writing style of the book. It's kind of difficult for me to explain, but it often felt unnatural and forced. Especially when it came to the dialogue.

Also, I expected the story to bounce between the point of views of the five teenagers, but it was actually only told from Lo's POV. I would have liked to get an inside look on all of their lives and their sides of the story, but Lo's POV was still decent (for the most part).

What I did really like was the entire concept of the book. I thought it was very creative and interesting, and had a strong lesson of appreciating what you have, and walking in someone else's shoes before judging them.

I liked the small amount of romance in the story, and for once, I'm happy that it didn't play too much of a big role. I usually love when romance is a big focus of a book, but I'm happy that it wasn't in this situation.

All in all, the book wasn't awful, but it certainly had its issues. I doubt I'll ever read it again and there are many, many considerably better YA standalone contemporaries out there.

I also can't see myself reading any other books by this author if she writes more in the future.

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## **Alyssa says**

\*\*\*Review posted on The Eater of Books! blog\*\*\*

The Way We Bared Our Souls by Willa Strayhorn

Publisher: Razorbill

Publication Date: January 22, 2015

Rating: 3 stars

Source: ARC sent by the publisher (unsolicited)

Summary (from Goodreads):

If you could trade your biggest burden for someone else's, would you do it?

Five teenagers sit around a bonfire in the middle of the New Mexico desert. They don't know it yet, but they are about to make the biggest sacrifice of their lives.

Lo has a family history of MS, and is starting to come down with all the symptoms.

Thomas, a former child soldier from Liberia, is plagued by traumatic memories of his war-torn past.

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As the reality of the ritual unfolds, this unlikely group of five embarks on a week of beautiful, terrifying experiences that all culminate in one perfect truth: In the end, your soul is stronger than your burdens.

What I Liked:

I was sent this book by the publisher as an unsolicited review copy, so I didn't feel much obligation to read it. But I read the synopsis, and it sounded pretty interesting to me, despite the fact that it's contemporary (and I don't really like contemporary novels). I liked this novel, even if I didn't love it.

The story is told from the first person point-of-view of Consuelo - "Lo". She is experiencing symptoms of MS, which is in her family. Kit, her ex-boyfriend, is grieving the loss of his dead girlfriend, Lucita. Thomas, a friend of Kit, is a former child soldier from Liberia, who has PTSD (or worse). Ellen, a former friend of Lo, has been using more and more drugs to feel less and less. Kaya, a former friend of Lo, has a condition that doesn't allow her to feel physical pain. All five teenagers suffer, and when Lo gets this group together, and they undergo a Native American ritual. But the ritual allows them to swap burdens, and for a week, they must learn how to handle new burdens, as well as their old ones.

This book was heavy. The story was so dense. And I don't mean physically. The novel isn't all that long, but the content is very dense. It took me a while to get through the book, and not because I was bored or because it was dragging. There was a lot going on, both on the surface level, and subtly. The author did a really great job of building all the levels of the story.

There are five main characters in this book. Lo is the narrator - we get her first person perspective throughout the entire novel. In the beginning, Lo pretends that things aren't the way they are, that she doesn't have MS. When she meets Jay by chance, she doesn't necessarily believe that the ritual will cure her, but she wants to

believe that SOMETHING will change. She gathers four ailing peers as well - not really friends, but acquaintances.

The swap takes everyone by surprise. Lo has Kaya's condition. Kaya has Thomas's condition - except she sees memories of her ancestors (who were Native American). Thomas has Kit's condition - so he's afraid of death (Kit's girlfriend died of a car crash). Kit has Ellen's condition - he isn't addicted to drugs, but he is always high. Ellen has Lo's condition - she has symptoms of MS.

Lo actually likes Kaya's condition, not having pain. Ellen hates her new condition. Kit is always happy (high), so he doesn't really seem to mind. Thomas is haunted, reserved, and now seems afraid of things (whereas he was not afraid of much better). Kaya has visions of her ancestors, which involves a lot of death and fighting with whites. Overall, the week passes... interestingly. They have a week because Jay (who performed the ritual) told them that they should come back in a week.

The teens learn a lot about themselves, and each other (that sounds cliché, but it's true). None of them were friends at the start of the book. But as the novel progressed, they banded together. And in the end, the teens look out for each other.

Lo has always been intrigued by Thomas, the Liberian boy who used to be a child soldier. Throughout the course of the story, this romance develops. It's such a raw and deep relationship from the start. Lo doesn't want to believe that she has MS, but knows better. Thomas is haunted by death, caused his own hands, and otherwise. But slowly, they learn to trust each other differently.

The ending of this novel took me by surprise. There was no way that I could have seen it coming - no obvious clues, other than the constant reminder of Lo's father's job. But one character surprised me, and made the ending very explosive. Overall, I was content with the ending, if not a little sad. But happy.

What I Did Not Like:

Theoretically, this one should have gotten more stars, but I didn't \*love\* the book. I thought it was interesting, I followed the story, and I definitely wanted to know what was going on and what would happen, but I wasn't entirely invested in the book.

These types of books aren't really for me, honestly. I gave this one a chance (and I'm glad I did!), but I'm not a huge fan of tough-issue contemporary novels. There are a lot of teen problems handled in this book, and the author handled the difficult content well. I just don't really like reading such sad novels. Personal preference!

I think I wanted a little more from the plot with Kit and Ellen, and less with Kit and Kaya. It seemed like there was a love triangle going on (not a significant one), but the wishy-washy behavior of Kit could have been contributed to his state of high happiness.

I also wanted a little more from Kit's backstory. I feel like everyone got some sort of personal healing, during that week. But Kit's healing didn't really seem personal - I guess him being high the whole time allowed him get over his ex-girlfriend's death? But wouldn't he have experienced some sort of withdrawal, after the teens performed the ritual again? Wouldn't he have gone way down after being so high (so to speak)? I was a little confused as to his personal healing, as well as physical healing.

But anyway. I didn't love this book, I didn't hate it, but I wouldn't rate it five or four stars. I was deeply

impressed by the debut, but as far as fiction and reading for enjoyment goes, I only liked the book, on a 3-star level. Which isn't bad!

Would I Recommend It:

Hmm, well, these types of novels don't really appeal to me - I struggle with tough-issue contemporary novels, but I liked this one. It's not something you can just jump into and read - it's not a light and fluffy read. It's dense and gritty and deep, and I liked it well enough, but I didn't love it. So, take that as you may!

Rating:

3 stars. A good debut novel from Strayhorn! I have no doubt that this talented author will write many more thought-provoking and intriguing stories.

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### **Abby says**

Very interesting read. The premise of this book involves five teenagers each with a different suffering. Consuelo "Lo", our main character, has multiple sclerosis and when offered a way to get rid of it, jumps at the chance. But the catch is that each person will switch problems with another. Suddenly they realize that their problems are their own and shouldn't belong to another. I loved the way this was presented and really invested in the characters.

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### **Hannah Evelyn says**

The Way We Bared Our Souls by Willa Strayhorn takes us through themes relevant to what adolescents face and highlights important issues in society in a interesting, clever, and unique way. Specifically, it expresses that to be comfortable with who you are, you must first realize you cannot be anyone else and your soul is stronger than your burdens. The book, published by Razorbill in 2015, is 228 pages and is in the contemporary/YA genre.

As the book opens, readers learn about Lo, a teen who struggles with her overwhelming symptoms of MS. The story is also told from her perspective, and from this, we gather insight into her thought, life, and needs throughout the spiritual journey she experiences. The writing is not very sophisticated, but the descriptive, simplistic style fits well with the perspective from which the story is told. Lo meets a medicine man who she immediately trusts, and he persuades her to participate in a sacred ritual that is said to solve her problem. She gathers the necessary group of four others, Kit, Kaya, Thomas, and Ellen, who each receive a totem from the ritual. The day after the ritual is performed, they had swapped burdens and totems. The book follows their week-long journey as they embark in finding strength in their souls. When they swap burdens with each other, they must walk in each other's shoes and understand their newfound difficulties. When they have to learn how to cope with another's body and how it affects their mind. When they realize the depth of their souls and how it carries them, you can overcome any burden because their soul is strong and because who they are is unique and their burden is part of who they are.

The intensity of the book is highly captivating and moves the book along quickly. An interesting point to highlight is the fact that the idea that acts as the antagonist is each character's burden rather than a person. The plot greatly depends on the setting because many of the events that take place throughout the book are based off the modern and historical New Mexico culture and history that surrounds where they live. While

this book starting with Lo's perspective, and focused on her and no other character, as new characters were introduced, character development was very evident in Lo and the other characters as we learned more about their past, as well as their hopes and souls, which both a focuses in the book. Each character is forced to deal with adult topics at a young age. These adult topics extremely heavy, but the writing style markets the books towards teenagers. This marketing can be perceived as quite accurate, because many times adolescents are the people who are forced to deal with it.

The authors purpose was to entertain, and this was definitely achieved through an informal, roundly articulate, descriptive, distinctive, fast-paced and conversational writing style. Strayhorn demonstrates an ability to keep the story moving and interesting well. There was always an event taking place that relates to the theme or plot of the novel, making the novel cohesive. This was an extremely interesting and unique plot that was creative as well as being fast-paced. Because of this, I would recommend this book to teenagers who enjoyed books by John Green, Sarah Dessen, or Laurie Halse Anderson.

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### **Bobbie says**

I won this book in the Goodreads First Reads Giveaway. I read the first few chapters to see if it would be appropriate to give to my son. They were very well written and engrossing. I think he will really enjoy reading this book.

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### **Renata says**

Meh. I thought it'll be amazing but it turned out sooo boring.

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### **Laura (Booksforbreakfast) says**

Have you ever finished a book and had a headache from the intensity? Well I just did! It was definitely one of those mind...blown moments.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I first started the novel and to be honest the beginning was a little slow for me. I thought about putting the book down and starting something else, but I decided to trek through and I'm very happy I did.

I really enjoyed the story idea and how it was executed was really well done. I loved Lo, I also loved that it was only in her perspective. Because I went into the story blind, I wasn't sure if there were going to be multiple POVs and I wasn't sure if it'd be confusing. I also loved how different each background was, and the stories behind them. I was most interested in Thomas' and Kaya's stories but found all of them capturing enough. Even though it was a little slow for me in the first 20-30 pages, once it got started, I felt like the story didn't let up until it was over.

I do have a couple things about it that I didn't like. The first one was there wasn't enough dialogue for me. I really like reading about people and their conversations, and I felt like Lo lost me a few times with her constant descriptions and long blocks of text. Another thing I didn't like was i felt the author used too many



bigger words to make the writing seem smarter in some instances, or more profound. When I had to look up the meaning of a word, I found that a big distracting. Lastly, I did feel like some of the conversations between the friends were a little unbelievable, considering they are teenagers. I felt like most wouldn't be so deep and profound when speaking to each other, but that's probably just me. ;)

Still an amazing but that I really recommend you read. It makes you think about your problems in a new light, which is what I love most about books.

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### **Becky says**

The premise is interesting. The character development is lacking. It builds up to a psychologically thrilling point and the concludes like an episode of Full House.

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### **Chelsey says**

I picked this up after reading a review that described it like this: a group of friends gather around a campfire to share their secrets and troubles - a drug addict, two girls with chronic illness, boys who are grieving. And I thought - hey! A YA about emotions and experiences and friendship, sounds great.

Yeah. The thing is, a description like that leaves out the huge problem with this book: it's staggeringly racist, in a "well, my black friend said it was okay," kind of way. These five friends aren't just meeting around a campfire, they're there to perform a faux-Native American magic ceremony lead by a faux-Native American shaman, where their problems are magically swapped - so the drug addict experiences the chronic illness, and the ill girl experiences grief, etc. Let's be clear: I'm not an expert in rituals of the Southwest American tribes, but this is made up, and it contributes to stereotyping of Native Americans as antiquated magicians and noble savages.

Native Americans and their experiences are repeatedly used as props and backdrops here. Our main character, Consuelo, is white, and the book goes out of it's way to make sure we know that even though she has a latino sounding name, she is 100% white. Her parents just loved the culture, you see, but she is fair as the day is long. Because lord forbid you have a brown main character.

One of Consuelo's friends, Kaya, is Native American, and when they all swap problems she inherits the PTSD of another character. But her PTSD manifests itself as magic flashbacks of her people's history, two hundred years ago, and the terrible way the settlers treated them. Because all Native people are magic, apparently, and can see the past. As an example to how tone-deaf this book is, there's a part in the middle where Consuelo and Kaya are in the car together. Kaya has already explained several horrifying murders she's had visions of, and yet, as they drive through the desert, Consuelo thinks about how the open land makes her feel like it all belongs to her, like it's her "manifest destiny" to own it. WTF? WTF? WTF?

And then there's the end. (view spoiler)

What could have been an interesting, deeply introspective book was just littered with racist stereotypes. "Manifest destiny." Jesus.

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## jasmine says

read a brand new review + q&a with the author on booky berries!

*i remembered something else kaya had said in people: "sometimes i don't really consider my condition the absence of pain. i consider it the presence of something else. something magic."*

where do i even start with this book? i spent months drooling over it after i saw the blurb and cover, and i had to have it the very second it was available. i loved (almost) everything: the setting, the characters, the friendships, the parental relationships, the familial relationships, the rituals, the storytelling/writing. it was beautiful. perhaps even more than all of that, from what i've gathered, the author did a lot of research about native american culture/history, and that's something that i really respect.

from the summary alone, i knew this book was going to be different from roughly 90% of the other books i've got on my to-read/read shelves, and i was not disappointed at all. consuelo was a strikingly unique mc, sassy, selfish, and occasionally infuriating in a way that was so *realistically teenaged* - not even just that, it was human. she was a human being that popped right out of the book, along with the rest of her friends.

even the background characters in this book were well thought out and meaningful, and the relationships that formed out of the main character's line of vision were perfect. strayhorn very skillfully wrote from a first person pov: consuelo never knew more than she would realistically know, there was no flirtation with the fourth wall. some questions were left unanswered, situations unexplained, characters underdeveloped, and all of that was perfect because *that's how life works*. you don't know everything about everyone around you, some things are a mystery, left unsolved forever. the most you can hope to do is learn from your own mistakes and grow as a person to be more emotionally intelligent and understanding, compassionate person, and this book really captured that.

there was only one flaw here for me, personally: the romance between (view spoiler). it was unnecessary, awkward, and to be completely honest, contrived. i've never liked the whole "i've always liked you since way before this book!!" trope because it feels like the author is taking the easy way out of having to write actual chemistry and development, and unfortunately, this book was no exception to that. i didn't actually understand *why* those two characters wanted to be together, except for this ritual drawing them together and even then, i'm not really sure i get it. there were other romances in this book that i liked, but that particular one just made me uncomfortable. it felt like this book could have been a lot better if that had been either left out entirely, or developed/acknowledged beyond just "i like you" "i like you too!!" and then eventually "i love you" "i love you too!!!" and everyone is magically happy.

overall, though, i thought this book was amazing.

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## Julie says

wow deep and so much better than I thought it would be :)

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## Wren says

22529157

Amazon / Goodreads

If you could trade your biggest burden for someone else's, would you do it?

Five teenagers sit around a bonfire in the middle of the New Mexico desert. They don't know it yet, but they are about to make the biggest sacrifice of their lives.

Lo has a family history of MS, and is starting to come down with all the symptoms.

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I really liked this book. It was achingly heartbreaking. A tale of true understanding and forgiveness. It was a story about friendship and staying together. About bravery in the worst, and best, of times. Of loss and gain. Of love and hate. Of truly finding your soul among the lies and deceit.

It was diverse. We have Kaya who is the descendant of the Native Americans who came before the European settlers. We have Liberian child soldier Thomas. We have MS-riddled Lo. Drug-addicted Ellen. (I said there were two with health problems and three with psychological ones. Kaya and Lo had the health problems. Kit had depression. I think Thomas had PTSD. And Ellen had a drug addiction.) We had more than Caucasian males. We had a Native American girl. And an African. (If I got my geography right. Liberia is in Africa.) I liked the diversity. We had many different people. I like that. The world is diverse. We need diversity. We can't just accept the guidelines. We need to break free and become a new generation of writers and readers. This book is the epitome of diversity. (Well...for this year...) Thank you, Willa Strayhorn. Thank you for that.

The characters are more human. They have problems. They have pasts. They aren't two dimensional. I didn't particularly like Lo. She was caring, though. She cared for her friends. She was worried for them. (In her own special way.) She was just a bit...too annoying at first. A tad whiny. Just a tad. She grew into a new character, though. Someone entirely different. She saw the world differently. She wasn't whiny. She was brave.

Kaya was interesting. Her analgesia was fascinating to read about. (Even though I hadn't heard of it before.) She was interesting. But her personality wasn't set in stone before the ritual. And after? I don't know. She seemed to be jumping from out of it to hyper. It was confusing. She was supposed to have taken Thomas's burden. But it didn't seem that way. I still liked her, though.

Kit...I'm not sure what to think. He doesn't seem that moeey in the beginning. Out of it, maybe. But moeey? And depressed? Not exactly. He seemed to think too much. But...I really liked hyper-Kit. Man. That was just amazing to read. I loved it. I wanted to laugh and smack him on the head at the same time. Kit was actually pretty well written. But a bit too flirty with Ellen. And a bit too reminiscent. Also, I felt like the brotherhood between Kit and Thomas was missing.

Thomas. Wow. Thomas. Great character. Absolutely fantastic. I adored his character. A haunting backstory. Aloof personality. He was fantastic. He had a dark past he was trying to hide. And it kept running at him. He couldn't hide his past. And when he took on Kit's fear? Wow. He turned into a new person. And while he had to be comforted, he was still brave. He is a brave and strong character. Anyone has to be when they go through the pain of war. I am mildly reminded of two people as I think of Thomas. One is my brave friend. (I won't name names.) But I also think of Shin from the nonfiction book 'Escape from Camp 14'. Stuck in real life, these two had to become someone else. Someone who didn't have compassion. (No offense to them, of course.) They had to turn off their minds and just fight. Some might even say they aren't human. (Even though they are. Emotionless or not.) This is what I look for in characters. A character you can care for. Someone who grows on you. Someone who makes you care and feel for them.

Ellen. Ah. I don't know what to think of Ellen. She is like...a female Kit. If that makes any sense. I didn't exactly like her. She wasn't someone I would like. In general. She was a bit annoying. And a little whiny. And she didn't really shake that. But...people will like her. I just didn't.

These characters all changed. That was something amazing. They all became someone else. They found the path. That was truly amazing.

It wasn't too heavy with the romance. The romance was, actually, kind of cute. (Between Thomas and Lo, I mean.) They were two people who were struggling through life. They complemented each other. One was darker. Another breaking in the darkness. They were like two halves of the same whole. And, if you know me, I don't like romance. (Practically ever. There are only a handful of couples I don't mind. Only a few I like. Only...one or two I ship undoubtedly.)

They weren't absolutely adorable. They were cute. Not bad. But not fantastic. There were things I didn't like. For example, how fast they moved things along. They were fast. They kissed. And barely did any talking before it. Wow. Physical attraction is a lot these days.

Other than that, I was fine with the romance. Between Lo and Thomas.

Ellen and Kit is a whole other story. I didn't like that. Where is the spark? The chemistry? When did they ever talk? I don't see it.

The only thing I didn't like was the ending. I mean...wow. The action tumbling over your head in the last few chapters. Things were thrown at you. It was a surprise ending. And then...things rolled down the resolution. And it wasn't the best resolution. I wish there was something better.

I didn't want Kaya to die. (Not a spoiler, guys. It's within the first chapter. I didn't ruin anything.) She wasn't a bad character. She was important to Lo. Lo had too much pain to begin with. (Aunt Karine. Hint hint.) There was so much happening. Goodness...

And how the story started at the end. I didn't like that. It was a bit odd for me. I prefer to have stories that start with the beginning. Chronological order is better for me. It's confusing when you just jump into the end, or the middle. It's just a nuisance, though. Not completely terrible. Only...meh.

Weather:

Clear skies

5/5

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## Emily says

I cannot help it; I have grown achingly, increasingly bored with basic YA storylines. You know the drill. A girl trapped in a dystopian society realizes she is different and overtakes the government with the help of a capital-R Resistance. Meanwhile, a girl in our world meets an enigmatic bad boy whose secrets threaten to tear her apart. I have read so much YA that these tropes fail to impress me, even when executed well.

That is why I am so drawn to unique concepts in fiction—I am so much more inclined to enjoy a book that explores a completely new idea. And that is why, when I first heard about *The Way We Bared Our Souls*, I knew I had to read it.

To some extent, Willa Strayhorn's debut delivers on its creative premise. The author does a fantastic job of describing each burden, painting a vivid picture of the symptoms of MS, the trauma of being a child soldier, and more. Even better, after the switch, Strayhorn creatively applies each new issue to each character. None of the burdens affect their new owners in quite the same way as their old owners, and I loved watching the impact of a given issue vary from person to person.

But, much like the lives of its main characters, this book's plot is not perfect. It lacks one key element: plausibility. At the start of the story, the burden-swappers are perfectly non-magical individuals living normal lives in the Santa Fe suburbs. But once they realize their burdens have been shuffled, they accept the situation as if it magic is a day-to-day event. Of course, they panic a bit as they grapple with each other's issues, but they barely seem surprised that they have been involved in an act of successful sorcery. I would have liked to see more confusion, more incredulity—I could not believe that they could simply brush off their situation with an "oh, that's strange."

Additionally, Strayhorn completely glazes over one major plot point: other characters who might realize that Lo, Thomas, Kaya, Ellen, and Kit have changed dramatically. No one—not even the protagonists' parents—notice anything different after the burden switch, another element I did not find believable. To be fair, some of the characters have rather absent parents, and others have small social circles, but with five main characters, someone should have noticed something was off. The fact that the author did not include this conflict makes the story seem a bit lazy and underdeveloped.

All of this could have worked if Strayhorn had given the story an atmospheric magical realism feeling, hinting that the characters do live in a world blurred at the corners by magic. However, Strayhorn's writing style does not achieve any kind of mystical mood. Instead, it reads as if the author was trying too hard to meet a set of YA criteria. At times, the voice of the narrator, Lo, comes across as slightly forced as she describes the requisite high school social hierarchy that too many YA novels emphasize. Even worse, *The Way We Bared Our Souls* includes an awkward romance with no real chemistry, only to meet the unspoken romance requirement in YA. The writing style is safe, never straying from established conventions, but it needed to be as bold, unique, and magical as the plot it accompanies.

However, as negative as my review may sound, I did enjoy this book. I just cannot ignore the lack of plausibility and nuance. Of course, Strayhorn is a debut author with plenty of time to grow—and with her incredible story ideas, I have high hopes for her future novels. I will absolutely pick up her next book, and I cannot wait to watch her style blossom.

This review originally appeared at [www.foreverliterary.blogspot.com](http://www.foreverliterary.blogspot.com).

