



What Is Real

Karen Rivers

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Dex Pratt's life has been turned upside down. His parents have divorced and his mother has remarried. When his father attempts suicide and fails, Dex returns to their small town to care for him. But he's not prepared for how much everything has changed. Gone are the nice house, new cars, fancy bikes and other toys. Now he and his wheelchair-bound dad live in a rotting rented house at the back of a cornfield. And, worse, his father has given up defending marijuana growers in his law practice and has become one himself.

Unable to cope, Dex begins smoking himself into a state of surrealism. He begins to lose touch with what is real and what he is imagining. And then there are the aliens...and the girl-of-his-dreams...and the crop circle...

What Is Real Details

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Cecilia says

Lost in the pot-induced haze in the cornfields behind his house, Dex Pratt cannot tell the difference between reality and fiction – or even past and present and future – any more. He smokes until he forgets everything, until nothing makes any sense anymore – and somehow that makes that makes the most sense of all. When he begins to obsess over the new girl and a crop circle mysteriously appears, Dex knows that something might be wrong. Yet he can't seem to clear his head long enough to figure out what that might be...

I have to admit that I felt as confused about What is Real as Dex was throughout the entire book. The screenplay-like beginning threw me off, and when it reverted back to regular prose I still didn't quite follow the story as easily. If Karen Rivers was trying for surreal, I think she nailed it on the dot – unfortunately, this did not work for me and I struggled to connect with Dex. He seemed to bounce from past to present, regular prose to screenplay, hypothetical people to real people, whenever he felt like it – and I couldn't keep up. The best way I can describe What is Real is that it is definitely different from other books, a little too “out there” for someone like me. I'd be interested to see how others have taken to this book because I feel like I missed some crucial element that makes this book “click” with me.

Rachel Seigel says

Written using alternating film directions and a type of present tense stream of consciousness, this novel tells the story of a boy who is barely hanging on, and the unbelievable encounter that changes everything. Liberal swearing and drug place this at older teen.

Alexis says

This book is up for a YA prize in the British Columbia book awards. As soon as I read the synopsis, I knew I had to read this. Dex Pratt is 17. His parents split up. His dad tries to commit suicide, and turns from growing tomatoes to growing weed. Dex becomes the caretaker of the weed and becomes a massive stoner.

This is a really depressing book. It's also one of the best examples of an unreliable narrator. Dex makes up movies and is constantly reframing his life. There are times when you don't know if scenes are real or imaginary and you feel a bit stoned as you read the book.

Rivers creates a bleak, depressing world for her characters. I was quite amazed at the skill in this book. I didn't always enjoy reading it, but I thought it was really well done.

Asia says

The book what is real was a great coming of age story that shows the struggle of young man who is in his senior year of high school. He is struggling with an addiction of weed which causes him to struggle with

what is real and what is fake. The book gave great detail of everything that he imagined. They would have some parts of the book that looked like a scripts of a tv show to represent that he feels he's going through life scripted because he finds it too hard to be real to the people around him. In some parts of this book i got teary eyed because of the stories he would tell and the emotion within the words. This book is really good on using imagery. I relate to this book because of some of the difficulties he has experienced with his family. When there is drama in your family it can really affect you and make you lose sight on everything and everyone in your life. I would definitely recommend this book to all my friends and family. I gave this book four out of five stars because I felt the book gave real emotion and could really impact others.

Shelley says

I really tried to get into this book but it was really difficult. I felt more like I was reading the rantings of a person on a pot trip since the main character is a big pot smoker. Half of the time, the storyline didn't make sense and the constant repeating of phrases, plus the addition of the main character trying to put part of the story into his version of a film did not help this book at all. I was very hopeful before I read it but I was very let down that so much could have been done with this book that was not done. A difficult and uneventful read to the end.

Katelynn says

This book is beautifully written even when it's describing ugliness (maybe even especially then). The prose, the characters, the motifs, the style and the narration - everything was unique and gripping even though I couldn't make sense of Dex's drug addled descriptions half the time. I didn't always enjoy every moment (I could've done without the Olivia storyline) but this book was so different and unpredictable and touching that I can't really fault it for much.

Holly says

Ok, I just finished this book. I was a little unsure of it when I first started reading it because of how some of the book is set up like a script for a movie. But, once I really got into the book I realized it really works. This was a really interesting story. You have your main character Dex who is basically high (on pot) the whole time and you get to see things how he does, then he starts to question what is real and what isnt. I really enjoyed the ending of this book I thought it was perfect. The book flowed really well, This book is very detailed so, I think that helps the reader to really see everything how dex does. So, Overall I would give this book a 5/5.

Sara Latta says

Whew...what a long, strange trip it's been. Or something like that. This is one dark, intense novel. Dex Pratt's life is falling apart, as we learn from his pot-addled narrative. His father tried to kill himself after his mother left him for a rich politician, but ended up partially paralyzed instead. His step-brother dies of a heroin overdose. Dex's father, once a lawyer who defended marijuana growers, has taken to growing it

himself. And Dex? Dex copes—or tries—by helping himself liberally to his father's weed. He's pretty much high the entire book, and his state of mind comes through in the surrealism of the narrative. Are the aliens real? How about the girl of his dreams, the one with the freckles in the place he'd always imagined they'd be? And how did the crop circle get into the cornfield in back of the house?

Much of the book is written in the form of a film script. These are some of the most surreal sections of the book, fittingly because these are also the parts where Dex is most stoned. This book is for older teens—maybe sixteen and up, and is definitely not for everyone. There's LOTS of drug use (although it's not glorified) and profanity, and some sex. There were some unresolved issues, some things didn't seem believable (his basketball coach never noticed that he was always high?) and things turned around a bit too neatly at the end. I wasn't sure if I liked "What is Real" most of the time I was reading it. It's pretty unrelentingly depressing, and I found myself wishing for some lighter moments. On the other hand, I couldn't put it down, so there you go. I received an ARC of this book from the Library Thing Reviewers program, for which I am grateful.

Anne says

In this YA offering, Dex Pratt's life as he'd known and enjoyed it has disintegrated, gone forever. He is left trying to piece together what's left while taking care of his father who is confined to a wheel chair after a failed suicide attempt. His father, once a lawyer who grew tomatoes, now has a grow-op in a rented house in a rotting cornfield. Dex's mother has tossed him believing he was involved with the drug related death of his stepbrother and he has lost contact with his sister. Angry, lost and unable to cope, Dex loses himself by smoking the profits from the grow-op. He's pretty much high all the time and that's why we can't ever tell for sure "What is Real". Dex sees himself as a film maker, and his "screenplay" works pretty well as a mechanism to move the story along - but sometimes, it just adds to the confusion. The language of this book is graphic and profane, but not actually offensive as we are sucked into Dex's quite extraordinary imagination.

Zahra says

I found this book quite confusing because he has flashbacks all the time then there are bits where he's making a movie or something and there are all these scripts so I couldn't quite keep up with what was actually happening in the book. I think the author put bits in which weren't quite necessary.

It's a boy named Dex and his parents are divorced he looks after his dad and he lives in a crappy house which is next to a corn field. He has a girlfriend but there's this new girl and he doesn't know if she's real or not. He can't really tell the difference between what's real and what's not.

It's was really confusing for me

It just didn't make sense

Libraresteph says

Reading this book made me feel like I was on drugs. I've never actually done drugs, mostly because I like to be in control and the out of control nature of being on them terrifies me. It also reminded me of being very sick, you know when your fever is so high you get delirious or you're in so much pain you can't really process anything else...those feelings I'm familiar with and so I had a hard time enjoying the book, it made me dizzy picturing things through Dex's perspective.

"maybe we laughed so much, we used up our quota" (131)

The most notable thing about the plot is that the narrator is completely unreliable. He's high most of the time, and even when you understand what he's saying you can't be sure what he's seeing is real. He's also a compulsive liar, lying to himself almost as much as to others. The way he loses himself in drugs and depression is expertly portrayed,

"I'm shedding pieces of me like someone with some kind of invisible leprosy". (37)

I think it's easy to sink into the sadness of his situation, to feel his dreams slipping away.

"Feral's addiction erased me" (63)

Despite the fact that the book was too drug riddled for me to enjoy very much personally I respect Karen Rivers for fabulous writing. There are some haunted metaphors I don't think I will forget.

"So she left Dad and became someone else, someone unrecognizable. She morphed as easily as a caterpillar. But we were the cocoon that had to be torn open so she could become some kind of creepy, unrecognizable butterfly, flying away." (21)

The abandonment issues kids of divorced families feel are beautifully developed in this story.

"this shitty town felt like a sweater I'd outgrown years ago that I was trying to pull back on and it wasn't working" (66)

It's very difficult to move back to somewhere you were nostalgic about and discover it's not quite the image in your mind.

"from the outside it looked like the school is vomiting kids in fits and starts, finally spitting out the last few stragglers and then leaning over, done (85)

Dex's unusual interpretations of school as he sits watching it from the outside are really interesting. There is a scene where he is too physically hurt and depressed to get out of his car, so he sits there the entire school day and is horrified by the fact that no one notices him there. Apathy is a prevailing theme, and the reader is left feeling sick at the idea of no one helping Dex, no one noticing when he stops talking because he's too depressed to keep up appearances anymore, no one noticing Tanis' scars. The lack of action about the abuse of foster kids and a teenage boy expected to care for his suicidal paralyzed father will be shocking to some but this is the idea, that we need to be shocked out of our apathy.

This novel is not for everyone. Not everyone will be able to handle the way it jumps around, the way Dex

frames everything with his imaginary camera- distancing himself from his life by turning it into a movie. But it is masterfully done and I'm curious about other books River has written.

Tamara Taylor says

I really enjoyed this book. It is a total mindfuck and you feel as though you are taking a trip without ever leaving home. The narrator keeps you second guessing right to the bitter end. It was a bleak, sad novel but I am glad I read it. Full of amazingly skillful writing.

Kayla says

This book was certainly . . . interesting. Told completely from Dex's perception, you're seeing things only through his eyes. Meaning if he can't tell the difference between what is actually happening and what he is only hallucinating, you can't, either. And because Dex is high for nearly the entire length of the novel, things quickly become distorted and it's easy to become as confused as he is.

I think 'confused' is a great way for me to describe how this book left me. It was good in its own right, with wonderful imagery and a neat writing style. Every so often the narrative would be interrupted with stage directions, Dex trying to direct the movie that is his entire life. While these scenes show him trying to get a hold on things, they also show that everything he is telling you could be a complete lie. And every person reading the book has to ask themselves-What is real?

Some of the minor characters had the potential to be great in their supporting roles, but didn't seem to quite get there. They had the means, but weren't shown in a way that really relates them to the reader. I didn't like that everyone in the story seemed so foreign, like nothing like this could ever happen.

Some warnings before you pick this up: There's heavy language in this book, along with adult themes, the most obvious being drug use.

I give What is Real 3/5 stars. While some parts of it were good, I don't think I'll be rereading this one.

Stephanie says

My Summary: Dexter Pratt used to have a great life. His loving parents would buy him anything he wanted, he was popular, and he had a band and a camera and actually lived in the same house as the rest of his family. But then, all of a sudden, everything changes.

Dex's mom moves out, divorces his dad, and gets married to some politician guy she met online. His dad - so distraught by being abandoned by his wife - attempts suicide. Because of this, Dex is forced to leave his posh new life (private school, new car, popular stepbrother) to return home and take care of his dad. But his dad is different now - instead of defending marijuana growers in his law practice, he has become one, supplying the entire town and Dex as well. Dex is so depressed by his current situation that he does the only thing he thinks he can do - smoke himself into a state of surrealism, where he has no idea what is real.

My Thoughts: If you've ever seen the movies Shutter Island or Inception, you'll know what I mean when I say What Is Real is a book that effectively messes with your head (in a good way). Our main character Dex is always so hopped up on his dad's 'stuff' that he hardly knows the difference between what he's imagining (he has quite the active imagination, trust me) and what is real. The reader sees Dex's world through his own point of view, meaning you - like Dex - have no differentiation between reality and imagination. Add to that the fact that there are crop circles popping up in the cornfield next door and the new girl at school is exactly what Dex has always wanted (down to the four freckles on her left cheek), and you'll begin to see Dex's downward spiral taking place.

Despite the controversial behaviour of the main character, I really liked this one! It really worked your mind and confused you at times (purposely and in a good way) so that you, like Dex, had no idea if he was actually experiencing certain things or just imagining everything while sitting in the cornfield smoking. Dex is one of those characters that has lost his way, and throughout the book you begin to wish that someone cared enough to help him out. Tanis was also a great character, and I'm sure everyone has met and 'Old Joe' in their lifetimes (creepy, perverted old man, anyone?). The writing was great - smooth and clear - and I really liked the addition of the 'camera scenes' at the beginning of the chapters.

Final Thoughts: I recommend this novel to anyone looking for a funny / sad contemporary lit book, and anyone who likes having their mind messed with a little. Because of the topic, I think this should be kept to readers 16 and up (or those who are mature enough to handle it). Can't wait for more from the author!

Heidi says

Dex narrates the story of a month of his life, plus a few pages about "Now" and a bit of the past. His wheelchair-bound dad has Dex growing pot in their basement and Dex's story is pot-induced, forcing the reader to wonder if Dex's reality is, in fact, the truth. At times the story reads like a screenplay. There is plenty of language which makes this more appropriate for older teens. I just couldn't get into this story.
