



*Asking For It*

Written by Louise O'Neill

Quercus, 2016, 324 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1681445373

*They are all innocent until proven guilty. But not me. I am a liar until I am proven honest. (p. 270)*

At eighteen, Emma O'Donovan is the most beautiful girl in her quiet Irish town of Ballinatoon--and she knows it. Accustomed to being the object of everyone's attention, she is vain and selfish, hiding her insecurities behind her perfect appearance. When she and her friends go to a party, she is determined to attract the most impressive boy. In the process of trying to get what she thinks she wants, she becomes intoxicated and takes prescription pills. The next thing she knows, she is awakened by her parents on her own front porch, disheveled and disoriented, with no memory of what happened the night before. Then she sees the photos.

Photos are posted all over social media and tagged under a fake account named "Easy Emma" -- horrifying, graphic, incriminating photos of Emma, unconscious and violated, for all the world to see. As the photos go viral and vicious comments spread like wildfire around her small community, Emma finds herself swiftly and mercilessly ostracized by friends and peers. Shocked and in a panic at hearing the word rape mentioned by her guidance counselor, Emma reacts defensively and claims she was pretending to be asleep in the photos -- a fact that does not help her later when she comes to terms with the fact that what happened to her was in no way consensual. By that point, a year has passed and she is so engulfed by shame that she no longer feels like Emma, but rather "the Ballinatoon Girl," the moniker given to her by the international press, who dissect her impending court case ruthlessly on the nightly news and online. Ostracized by her community that rallies behind the boys, Emma doesn't feel that even her parents believe she wasn't asking for it on some level. Disgusted with herself and deeply depressed, she retreats into herself and barely manages to function as the trial looms closer and closer.

*Asking For It* raises hard questions about how society treats rape victims in a way that few other YA books on this subject tend to do. O'Neill's writing is unflinching in its depiction of Emma's pain: raw and harrowing and terribly real. It is provocative in its brave and honest exploration of rape culture and victim-shaming; for in her bold decision to introduce Emma as an unlikeable character at the start of the book, O'Neill forces the reader to confront the same uncomfortable questions facing Emma's tight-knit community in the aftermath of her rape. As readers, we have the distance to realize that nobody deserves what happens to Emma. In its chilling details, O'Neill's ripped-from-the-headlines tale bears echoes of real-life rape cases closer to home.

Emma's story takes place in a quiet Irish town with all the details of small-town Irish

life and the cadences of Irish teenagers portrayed with pitch-perfect verisimilitude by O'Neill, herself a native of a small Irish town. This is a story, however, that could happen anywhere. Emma's story contains traces of Steubenville and Maryville in its portrayal of a close-knit community who regards the local sports team as heroes incapable of wrongdoing. As readers' hearts break for Emma, it is impossible to forget that this sort of thing happens all too often, the world over. O'Neill offers no easy answers, but she leaves readers with plenty to think about. This powerful book begs to be discussed, and will stay with readers long after they put it down.

Pair *Asking For It* with E.K. Johnston's *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2016) for another distinctive look at an individual's experience with rape. Laurie Halse Anderson's classic novel *Speak* (1999) offers another perspective, that of a victim whose trauma is suffered secretly in silence. Each individual victim has her own story, and each situation is distinct in its details and outcomes; it is our responsibility as readers to listen to them, and to follow O'Neill's lead by always asking ourselves the hard questions.

*Asking For It* was named a 2017 Printz Honor Book by the American Library Association, as well as one of School Library Journal's Best Books of 2016 and one of New York Public Library's Best Books of 2016. It was the 2015 winner of the Bord Gáis Energy Irish Book Award in its native Ireland. O'Neill's previous book, *Only Ever Yours* (2015), was the recipient of multiple awards and critical acclaim. O'Neill lives in Ireland and writes a weekly column for the Irish Examiner. She has worked on a documentary, "Asking for It," about rape culture in Ireland.

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