

Damsel

Elana K. Arnold

Balzer & Bray/Harperteen, 2018

Reviews

- [School Library Journal](#) (June 27, 2018): “Graphic violence, sexuality, and rape are present on the page, though carefully presented to create a crucial juxtaposition to the lyrical writing. The characters’ roles, actions, and motivations are reflected through foils, revealing powerful symbolism and dramatic irony. All of this works to increase the tension, which comes to a dark but ultimately satisfying conclusion. **VERDICT** This incisively written allegory rips into a familiar story and sets it aflame. Highly recommended for high school libraries where literary feminist retellings are popular.” Starred review.
- [Booklist](#) (Aug. 2018): “Arnold’s (*What Girls Are Made Of*, 2017) pitch-black fairy tale is not subtle in its delivery, but, as its volcanic ending attests, this is not a tale that requires subtlety. It’s not an easy read: physical, sexual, and psychological violence all come into play, and adults may want to be on hand for discussions. But for teens, especially girls, learning to transform sadness and fear into active, productive fury, it’s an essential allegory. Eat your heart out, *Sleeping Beauty*: this brutal, devastating, powerful novel won’t soon be forgotten.” Starred review.
- [Horn Book](#) (Jan. 27, 2019): “Hints along the way suggest Ama’s true origin and the nature of her ‘rescue’ well before they are revealed, but the conclusion of her tale is nevertheless both surprising and satisfying. Though somewhat reminiscent in plot of Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, Arnold’s wrenching tale is more akin in theme and tone to Lanagan’s *Tender Morsels* (rev. 9/08) or *The Brides of Rollrock Island* (rev. 9/12) — lyrical, brutal, and unapologetically feminist.”
- [Kirkus](#) (Oct. 2, 2018): “Arnold (*Bat and the Waiting Game*, 2018, etc.) blends an abusive romance-novel relationship and intense feminist and patriarchal imagery with the classic storyline of a prince saving a damsel from the lair of a dragon. ... What if, instead of being the hero’s beloved, you are your abuser’s captive? The symbolism and imagery, as well as the meaning of the sexual violence that is perpetrated upon Ama, may go over the heads of less sophisticated readers.”
- [Publishers Weekly](#) (Oct. 22, 2018): “With haunting prose and lush descriptions, Arnold (*What Girls Are Made Of*) weaves a terrifying tale that explores contemporary conversations about rape culture, misogyny, male entitlement, female agency, and the need for consent. The message is as timely as it is vital, but frank discussions of self-harm, physical and emotional abuse, and descriptions of sexual violence may not be appropriate for readers at the younger end of the stated range.”

Awards

- [Printz Honor Book](#), 2019
- [Rhode Island Teen Book Award Nominee](#), 2020

Lists

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Response to Challenges

- In Brevard County, FL, the local chapter of Moms 4 Liberty provided the Brevard County School Board with a list of 19 books found in school libraries, including *Damsel*, which they claim violate Florida's statute against providing obscene materials to minors. ([The Ledger](#), Apr. 26, 2022). School Board Chair Misty Belford stated that the books had undergone an "informal review process" and some schools had chosen to remove the books from their libraries ([Florida Today](#), May 8, 2022). Brevard County School Board voted unanimously to create a new process for challenging books, allowing them to be challenged at the district level as well as at the individual school level ([Florida Today](#), May 11, 2022). As of this writing, there is no record of Moms 4 Liberty members submitting a formal district-wide challenge for any of the 19 books. No statement on the books or their content has been made by the School Board, and no school librarians appear to have been interviewed.

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