

You Look Something: An Indigenous Coming-of-Age Novel

Jessica Mehta

Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing (Apr 7, 2020)

Softcover \$14.99 (248pp)

978-1-948018-74-6

Questions of body image, sexuality, family, and racial identity are raised in Jessica Mehta's novel *You Look Something*

When Julia moves from a small community college to a university in Portland, she immerses herself in every opportunity the school and city has to offer, eager to reinvent herself. Using student loans, Julia indulges in salon visits, shopping sprees, and binge drinking, racking up debt and weight. Within a year, she gains over a hundred pounds, and her self-image goes under attack because of backhanded compliments about how she “would be pretty.” A serious diagnosis for her boyfriend, Ezra, and her father further compound her weight gain and financial distress.

With her focus cluttered by Ezra and sorority life, Julia narrowly escapes expulsion and recommits herself to a new major. Channeling her experiences with poverty, parental neglect and incarceration, and racial tensions, Julia finds success in writing, but struggles with what it means to embrace her Native identity. She tans often, describing a wish to “bake beautiful into [her] too-pale skin,” and expresses guilt over applying for and accepting Native American scholarships: “Like it was a hack my white skin should have gotten me barred from.”

Julia is a complex, almost unreliable narrator. She appears ambivalent, as if experiencing her existence through a fog, and some of her choices are hard to sympathize with or understand because of her lack of introspection. Often aided by alcohol, she is apathetic in many of her relationships; this confusingly conflicts with her academic and professional aspirations.

The novel leaves a few dangling questions and hastily knotted threads—a python Julia purchases disappears from the narrative until she is rehomed late in the novel—but its final pages find Julia at a hopeful turning point, learning that it is never too late to right the ship.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (March / April 2020)

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