



Escape Theory

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Not on Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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This is the first of a potential series set in Keaton School, a prestigious co-ed boarding school on the Californian coast. Keaton is not on any spectrum from, say, Malory Towers to Roedean or Eton, let alone Hogwarts. They do things differently here. Sixteen year old scholarship student Devon Mackintosh is just beginning her Junior (penultimate) year. But we begin with a flashback to her first week at the school two years earlier, featuring a nocturnal adventure involving eating Nutter Butters, searching for milk in the school kitchens only minutes before Curfew, witty dialogue and an electric moment of connection with the charismatic Jason (?Hutch?) Hutchinson, a student whose family are steeped in Keaton tradition. Back in her Junior year and Devon is about to become Keaton's first Peer Counsellor, fresh from what sounds like a mechanistic training course in techniques, run by Mr Robins, Keaton's adult Counsellor. So far, just about, so good. But, and this is the kind of But to stretch a British reader's credulity, her first clients (her peers, remember) are there to talk about how they are handling Hutch's death. Really? Yes, Hutch has apparently taken his own life, the entire school is in trauma, so let's get the kids to lay it all out there to a novice counsellor who is a classmate. Not even in California?.

From this point on, I found the shenanigans at Keaton hard to believe. Okay, money is everything here, a kind of value in itself, and one that might generate extraordinary behaviour. Hutch's home is in the legendary Marin County, just over the bridge from San Francisco; it used to be the site, at least in novels, of some of the more bizarre extremes of affluent American self-indulgence. Keaton is awash with drugs and dealers, romances, jealousy, the odd pregnancy. Not only is Devon hearing students' angst about Hutch, she is also assigned clients who have been caught shoplifting in the local town. Lessons (as in most school stories, admittedly) are a sideshow to the real business of the school: relationships. Everywhere there are questions. Who has stolen Devon's Mont Blanc fountain pen? Why was one of Jason's last acts to purchase a pregnancy test kit? The confidences Devon's counselling role reveal prompt her suspicion that Hutch's death is no suicide. All of this in an environment dripping with wealth and privilege where most of the teaching staff are invisible or indifferent to what's happening.

Margaux Froley, say her publishers, is herself a 'boarding school veteran and a connoisseur of all things YA'. I know things have changed since I taught this age group in an affluent American suburb back in the wild sixties. So, everything here might just about be factually plausible, but Froley did not make me believe in the essential plot device of Devon's

peer counselling assignments which give her the evidence to play detective. Will young British readers be less sceptical? It's true, they bought heavily into the teenage improbabilities of **Twilight**, but this time there is no alluring sexual fantasy driving the plot. I doubt if there is the same likelihood of a massive UK cult following here.

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