



## Without Tess

*Marcella Pixley*

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Tess and Lizzie are sisters, sisters as close as can be, who share a secret world filled with selkies, flying horses, and a girl who can transform into a wolf in the middle of the night. But when Lizzie is ready to grow up, Tess clings to their fantasies. As Tess sinks deeper and deeper into her delusions, she decides that she can't live in the real world any longer and leaves Lizzie and her family forever. Now, years later, Lizzie is in high school and struggling to understand what happened to her sister. With the help of a school psychologist and Tess's battered journal, Lizzie searches for a way to finally let Tess go.

## Without Tess Details

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## From Reader Review Without Tess for online ebook

### Tracey says

So close to being 5 stars but then ending just left me feeling....pissed off. Lizzie spends the whole book still trying to deal with her sister's death that happened years ago...and it's all resolved in the last few chapters? That is such bullshit. The therapy sessions show how damaged she is, the flashbacks display how disturbed her sister was and how she tried to drag Lizzie into her madness. 10 years of living with a crazy sister, 5 years blaming herself for her death, and she feels all better because she wrote a poem and talked to an old childhood friend? I just cannot believe this ending. I mean why? It would have been better if the author left it like Lizzie was on her way to being better. Like she was finally gonna deal with Tessa's death and move on. but the way Marcella Pixley wrote it, it made it seem that lizzie sat down, wrote a poem, talked to Isabella's brother, confessed her "guilt", and was all better. it just completely turned me off and pissed that I read through all of this awesomeness in the beginning and middle and most of the end, only to get a steaming pile of crap at the end. UGH!!!!

but still a very good book :)

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### Wandering Librarians says

This was sad. Poor Lizzie. I felt so awful for her, especially when she was little. We spent a lot more time in the book with young Lizzie than 15 year-old Lizzie, and I think that's why I sympathized with her younger self more. Lizzie idolized her older sister. She wished she could be more like her - imaginative and free spirited. Tess seemed to have a magic about her that Lizzie couldn't get. As much as Lizzie worshiped Tess, Tess was often cruel to her. Tess was trapped in her fantasy world and didn't see that she often ended up hurting other people, and that person was usually Lizzie. Tess had Lizzie eat a dried, dead crab, which made her throw up, to prove to Tess that Lizzie loved her. When Tess said she was a selkie but that Lizzie wasn't, she had Lizzie lie naked in the ocean in fall, almost freezing before she finally got up. Tess stabbed Lizzie's hand with her earring to make a blood promise, and gave her blood poisoning, and then wouldn't let Lizzie go inside to get their mother when she started feeling sick.

It was really terrible to hear how Tess was, and wonder why didn't her parents notice things more. What I thought was interesting was that how Tess was in school was never mentioned. She was 11 years old, so she'd been going to school for a number of years. No one noticed anything? Tess did mention not being able to use her magic when other people were around, but it's hard to think that she could have completely held it together at school. I don't know quite what was wrong with Tess, but she was clearly detached from reality and delusional. As Lizzie goes through her journal, the words and images become more and more disturbing, until it's hard to think that they were coming from such a young child.

As Lizzie got older and made a new friend, Tess was hurt and desperate to keep Lizzie believing with her as she always did. Tess really did believe all her transformation stories, and after Lizzie got blood poisoning, she wasn't as quick to do what Tess said anymore. This is when Lizzie and Tess' parents finally decided something needed to be done. Tess started going to therapy, but she didn't want to change. She didn't want to take medicine that would make her not believe in magic, and became more depressed. So one night she took

Lizzie out to the ocean and she drowned herself, with Lizzie there.

Lizzie, of course, feels horribly guilty for not saving her sister. Lizzie's parents are a mess for not noticing sooner and helping their daughter. No one talks about Tess, and so none of them have ever been able to move on. Lizzie still thinks of Tess as her wonderful, imaginative, magical older sister, not a little girl who was very sick.

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### **Debbie Francisco says**

If I could have given this book less than one star, I would have. Mental health is not dealt with the delicacy that such topic requires. The author fails to draw the line between imagination and psychosis since the kids in the story seem to be so engaged in the weird things they do, it almost seems hard to believe that there's something "off" about Tess when the other children act somewhat alike when they're around her. I don't know who told Marcella Pixley that it was a good idea to write about a character who suffers from an eating disorder at the age of eleven and avoid to describe anything that would validate such diagnosis. Tess "dies by suicide" and this isn't even addressed the proper way, because it just comes off as if she was a selfish and stubborn little girl who wanted to have things her way. Lizzie's character was annoying; she didn't have the courage to stand up for herself a single time in the whole story. I hated how she allowed Tess and Isabella to boss her around and dictate what she believed in. Also, it's quite ridiculous how not only did she open up to Niccolo after speaking to him once—compared to pretending she was fine when she spoke to Kaplan during their weekly sessions for FIVE years—but she kissed him or he kissed her. Whatever way it was, it was wrong. It doesn't make sense for someone who feels responsible for a death to make out with the first person that says "it wasn't your fault". It just came off as if the author was trying too hard to integrate a good thing—which OBVIOUSLY had to be romance—into the plot but it was just forced and wasn't relevant to the story at all. The whole idea of Lizzie using her sister's poems as assignments is just stupid. The way she narrated the story was more poetic than the actual poem she wrote. Also, the whole religious aspect did not contribute anything to the story. There's also this scene where Marty, the girls' dad, physically forces Tess to take her medication and it's just wrong—I understand that as a parent, he could have been frustrated to the lack of cooperation of Tess in her recovery but I don't see how it would make sense for him to be so insensitive to her own thoughts about the treatment and the fact that she seemed compliant after he basically shoved the pills down her throat just shows that it wasn't a good way to handle the situation. I'm sure I could go on about everything else I hated about the book, but I'm tired of complaining about it.

This was the worst book I have read in months.

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### **Barbara says**

Tess and Lizzie Cohen were close, sisters who spend just about every waking minute together when they were younger. Tess was the leader, imaginative and creative, drawing and writing poems in her sketchbook. Because she believes so strongly in magic, Tess is sure she can fly through the air. She convinces Lizzie that she knows magic spells, and Lizzie follows her, somewhat blindly, until the two of them grow older. Slowly, Lizzie and her parents realize that while Tess is imaginative and unique, she is also quite ill, possibly psychotic. Convinced that she is immortal, she refuses to eat, and when her doctor prescribes medication, she hides the pills and doesn't take them. When Tess drowns on a late night attempt to leave her human skin behind as she takes the form of a selkie, she leaves behind a grieving, guilt-filled Lizzie. Five years later,

Lizzie is still suffering and has taken to reading Tess's poems aloud in class, claiming them for her own.

This is a heart-breakingly honest look at mental illness and its effects on everyone around it. The author makes it clear just how influential Tess was on Lizzie and how difficult it will be for Lizzie to break free from the hold her sister still has on her. The author also describes perfectly the jealousy that makes Tess want to harm Isabella, her sister's new friend, an incident that makes it clear just how far gone Tess is.

Although Lizzie wants to believe in the magical world Tess has created, as she grows older, she gravitates to reality rather than magic. The writing is deeply personal, and the poems written by Tess that introduce some of the chapters are intimate and revelatory. Lizzie's journey back from the brink is not an easy one. This title will stay with readers long after the final page has been reached.

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## Cassie says

A solid 3.5, but Goodreads doesn't allow half stars.

My thanks to NetGalley for the e-ARC.

I had conflicted feelings about *Without Tess*.

Author Marcella Pixley skillfully reveals how Tess and Liz's innocent childhood games and play-acting can turn sinister very quickly, and the horror is very real. Tess's cruelty is almost guileless at times, making it even more terrifying. The girls' invented game of Crab Carcass Bingo is gross and macabre, but not unrealistic. While Tess's darkly vivid imagination and desperate belief in magic are strange and she becomes a kind of de facto antagonist, Pixley is able to make her worthy of sympathy though she is not at all sympathetic. The reader realizes just how dangerous Tess is long before young Liz does, creating interesting narrative tension. Liz loves her sister deeply, despite the constant hurts Tess inflicts upon her, but she also resents her destructive behaviors and jealousy. The dynamic between the sisters is suitably complex.

As if the subject of mental illness weren't enough to handle, Pixley also tries to tackle religious confusion. Liz's family is Jewish, but not particularly religious, while her neighbor Isabella is a devout Catholic. While Isabella uses her religion to solve her problems and encourages Liz to turn to Jesus, Liz has difficulty trusting in her faith. Scenes of Isabella and Liz taking Communion are juxtaposed with Tess taking her medication, and both sisters reject their respective symbols; the body of Christ and Tess's pills cannot serve as a panacea for the girls' respective problems. While this particular comparison is interesting, the religious subplot in its entirety seems superfluous, especially since I didn't feel it was completely resolved.

What I didn't particularly like were the girls' voices. They just didn't sound like children to me. Tess and Liz are 11 and 10 respectively for much of the story's action, and some of their conversations (and Tess's poetry especially) were way too mature. There's a certain childishness in the scenes with Isabella and Liz that is sorely lacking in those between the sisters. I suppose that may have to do with the fact that this is a YA novel that is about 75% flashback to the sisters' elementary years. Its mature subject matter demands a more mature audience, but most of the action occurs while the girls are still immature. Their behavior certainly reflects this, but not their conversations.

Tess's poetry is utterly unbelievable, and while several characters refer to them as childlike and magical, they really aren't.

For example, "Queen of Toads": *Ghosts of toads still haunt my dreams / Scratch my cheeks with desperate nails / Leather lips still jeer and scream / And mouths drip blood on muddy trails*. Interesting poem, but not

one I would describe as "childlike" or "magical", and just not believably penned by an 11-year-old. The poems are used as a framework for the narrative, and while they intrigue me, they don't entirely work because they don't feel age appropriate. I just cannot buy that these poems are Tess's voice.

Tess and Liz's parents seemed like good people that actively parented while still allowing their children certain freedoms, which makes it difficult to understand why they didn't notice that Tess's disordered eating was a part of a larger problem. Tess is never depicted as acting any differently around her parents than she does with Liz, so I didn't think she was being duplicitous or manipulative, but somebody, somewhere down the line should have picked up on some behavior problems. Issues like Tess's would never go unnoticed by schoolteachers. It didn't make sense to me.

I found teenage Liz rather unlikable, and while I don't need to love my protagonists to enjoy their stories, it really didn't help when compounded with the other problems mentioned above. She's bitter, jaded, and utterly passive - not a fun character to inhabit.

The writing is solid, but it's difficult to enjoy a story like this, and I didn't feel as moved as I wanted to be. The resolution satisfied me, but didn't resonate as strongly as it could have if I believed more in these characters, or if I liked Liz more.

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### **Nomes says**

Without Tess is not at all what I expected it to be. Where I settled in for (another) YA book dealing with the loss of an older sister, it quickly became evident that I was reading a book unlike any I have read before.

The premise is simple: Lizzie's sister Tess died (just how is withheld from the reader until nearing the climax) and, years later, Lizzie is still coming to terms with everything that happened. The story is presented with flashbacks of Tess and Lizzie's childhood as well as present tense narration, consisting of Lizzie with the school psychologist, with her parents and with a boy (childhood friend and now classmate).

My gosh. I took a moment to settle into the story due to such a distinct and unusual writing style. The writing is imaginative and descriptions are often startling ~ it's gorgeously written, if it were a painting, it would be bright, swirling, delicate, mesmerising, with a hint of darkness and utterly unique. Words were carefully, lovingly chosen, and not always the words you would expect, making reading sentences alone often a surprising experience, the rhythm and melody of the passages taking on a life of their own.

It was an extremely emotive experience, reading about two young girls, playing at make-believe. I adored that aspect, reminiscent of my childhood. Of course, as the story unravels, the make-believe takes on a life of its own for Tess, who becomes such a dynamic and unpredictable character. I mean, WOW, some of the things she did/believed blurred the line between psychosis and reality, creating a pool of tension (the tension built so well, especially knowing that Tess has died, which made certain scenes ominous even in its innocence).

I read this in one sitting (from midnight to 3am, in a bungalow in Bali, sleep evading me). It was a swirly and addictive experience and, at one point, I felt so caught up in the events I wasn't at all sure I wanted to be in the story (if that makes sense). Ultimately, though, I thought it was brave and I still feel echoes of sadness just thinking about it.

It's an extraordinary story. Much of it set in childhood, scenes and memories of young girls, making it not entirely YA in feeling. It's also something gorgeously different. I recommend it for fans of lyrical writing, readers who like to snuggle up and shed a tear (it's a sad one). Fans of sisterly love and mental illness (from a fresh and startling angle, a mind so overcome in a girl so young). Personally, this really worked for me. Consider me a fan, this is one story I will not forget.

*thanks netgalley*

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### **Anna says**

Tess Cohen is so thin you can almost see her bones through her skin. She has wild red hair and a personality that is fantastical, genius, and disturbing. She is a Selkie, she is a flying horse, she is a wild ferrel cat, she is a werewolf. Tess Cohen is the Queen of Toads, living by the laws of Merlin and living by no predictability at all. And then there is Lizzie, the younger sister, the one who is more timid, who follows, who watches her older sister feed a statue of the virgin mary coconut crunch bars and tucks her safely into bed before she herself blacks out from following the werewolf during a full moon. And then there is Lizzie without Tess, a girl who must come to terms with the death of the person who scared her but who also showed her.

“And if you wander around in bare feet so that your toes sink into the rug, if you wander around and touch things with the very tips of your fingers, let them glide like feathers across her quilt, her walls, her desk, her dresser, if you spin very fast in circles the way she always used to do , and let the death room swirl around you like a cocoon wrapping you in white silk threads, you could imagine that at any moment she is going to explode through the door, laughing with her mouth wide open at the perfection of this one final joke.” (253 Pixley)

Without Tess exquisitely and simply captures the essence of loss with the warmth of remembrance, thereby deserving a full five stars. The contrast of child's fantasy in an aging realistic world is explored along with dimensions of mental illness, the importance of one's religion, the struggle between past and present, and the way people view the world based on the things they learn from those who they are close to. The language and style of Pixley's writing is irrevocably poetic. Poetic language such as that in this novel can pull at a readers heart like picks on a guitar, reaffirming the concept of writing as a true craft, each word a particular paint stroke, placed so carefully as to create a painting that makes one's soul want to sing to the heartbeat of the narrating character.

The voice in this book switches between the modern, 15 year old Lizzie and the younger Lizzie who interacts with Tess. While we see the older Lizzie reflecting back on her childhood with Tess, the younger Lizzie grows and develops. She becomes more aware of Tess's mental illness which causes her to believe in fantasies that were simply imaginative games when they were children. Lizzie starts to grow up. But Tess doesn't want to come with her. In an effort of not betraying her sister, Lizzie continues to play along with Tess's games. She watches over her when Tess turns into a wolf in the middle of the night and stalks the neighborhood, a reverse of the earlier years when Lizzie only looked up to Tess, living in her world and under Tess's protection from everything that was “bad” but not necessarily the things that were dangerous. This book challenges the joy of imagination with the sanity of reality. And when Lizzie ends up in the hospital as a result of Tess's games, Tess finally gets therapy and medication. But she doesn't want to live in a world without her magic. Nothing would be beautiful or poetic without Merlin, or being able to fly. Who would want to give that up? Lizzie blames herself for not being able to save Tess, however the question remains how happy would Tess have been. Her world would have been gone, and every eccentricity that made her who she was would have dimmed, as if her fiery mane were to be combed and fastened in a braid. Throughout the book, the protagonist Lizzie tries to come to terms with the death of Tess through looking

through her “Pegasus Journal”. The drawings are disturbing and beautifully done. This even was poetic in that it hinted towards brilliant artists; Were they crazy, or was it genius? Lizzie begs this question too; was Tess crazy, or was everyone else?

“At first glance, the picture is beautiful...But then, when you let your eye travel ... the angel’s body is emaciated and sunken like that of a corpse, as if the wings are the only part of the angel that is alive. The bones show through the flesh. You can see the tendons, the muscles, the veins...” (147 Pixley)

The realization that Lizzie gets from coming to terms with her sister’s illness is saddening. The thought that all that childhood magic, that for an amount of time she believed to be real too, the thought of all of that being a delusion of illness is heartbreaking. Throughout the story, Lizzie feels as though if she lets go, she is betraying Tess, that by losing faith in her she is letting Tess’s spirit die just like she feels she let Tess die. At one point or another, we all come to a critical realization that someone we look up to isn’t omnipotent. Unfortunately for Lizzie this realization is coupled with the acceptance of Tess’s death.

Lizzie wants desperately to have something to believe in, especially after the death of Tess, when she has lost the one person who inspired her to truly believe in something. Another theme in this book is religion. The contrast of her rational, more mainstream Catholic neighbor Isabella, the majestic beliefs of Tess, and her Jewish upbringing surround Lizzie and all tug at what she believes in, along with what she wants to believe in.

And in the end, Tess was truthfully an object of magic. Everything that she and Lizzie did they truly believed. They were horses galloping by the river and they were Selkies on the shore and they truly believed. And what is reality but perception? What is delusion when no one tells you you’re wrong? What is magic but two girls spinning in white dresses with summer on their skin and popsicles on their tongues? And finally, what are characters but figments of words so artfully sewn together that they shape and define personas until they are real? What is writing but magic?

Pixley, Marcella. *Without Tess*. New York: Margaret Ferguson Books, 2011. Print.

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### **Melissa (i swim for oceans) says**

Tess and Lizzie lived a charmed childhood full of magic, wonder and impossible things becoming possible. It’s a world of escapism that they share and love together but, eventually, they must grow up. Lizzie recognizes this. Tess, however, cannot live in a world without magic. Her world of magic becomes darker and more terrifying as it begins to consume her from the inside out and she loses her grip on reality. Now a teenager, Liz is learning to live without Tess, and must delve into her sister’s innermost thoughts to understand and come to terms with the fact that the Tess she knew and loved is, and was, gone a very long time ago.

Without Tess, in a word, is daring. Not too many young adult authors will broach the topic of mental illness, and those who do tend to sugarcoat and dance around the dark nature of many of them. Marcella Pixley, however, is not one of those authors, and *Without Tess* is not one of those books. Rich and alluring, *Without Tess* invites you into a world where magic is real for two little girls, then shows how the inevitable reality embraces one girl into the fold and cuts another to the bone. Haunting and painful, the book tackles tedious subject matter with a steady gait and lyrical prose to make the reader both aware and understanding of the depth of mental illness.

I don’t think I was fully prepared for *Without Tess* when I read it. I had an image of a previous book on

mental illness in my mind, and I was expecting it to be a bit surface-heavy. Rather, *Without Tess* wastes no time in throwing you into the all-consuming darkness of Tess's delusions as they consume her from the inside out. We literally watch her wither away into oblivion, all the while causing possibly irreparable damage to her sister. Tess was a complex character. I despised her for the wrongs she did to Liz, and for the bone-crushing pain she inflicted on others. At the same time though, I pitied her and wanted mercy for her. Liz was also a multi-faceted character. I enjoyed reading about her in her younger self, while I felt her teenage self in the present was rather unlikable. The bitterness and anger that oozed from her character was understandable, of course, but it made me dread seeing things through her eyes because it was so bleak. *Without Tess* does more than show mental illness though. The author tackles the topic of religion and one's belief systems which, at times, felt true and fitting. At other times though, I felt like it overburdened the plot. I will say that *Without Tess* also featured dialogue for the younger version of Lizzie and Tess's poetry that felt a bit too mature and forced. Dark and mesmerizing, yes, but not true to their age.

Overall though, *Without Tess* was a powerful read portraying the depth of mental illness while giving us a rich and developed plot. I give it a 3.5 out of 5, and I'd recommend it to upper YA audiences and adults, especially those who like issue books and contemporary fiction.

I received this book free of charge in exchange for an honest review. This, in no way, affected my opinion or review of this book.

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### **Carson Schubert says**

Weird. Really, really, weird. All it did was piss me off at Tess for messing up Lizzie's life

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### **Harshini says**

I really really enjoyed this book. I don't want to tell the story to anybody that has not read it and is willing to read it. I highly highly recommend you to read this book.

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### **Book Twirps says**

*Without Tess* is an achingly gorgeous read. The writing is so lyrical and the characters so vivid, I felt as if I were in the same room with them. The story focuses on Lizzie whose sister Tess died when she was younger. Six years later she is still coping with the grief.

Eleven-year-old Tess lives in a fantasy world. In the beginning I was able to connect with Tess. Like her, I had a very active imagination when I was young. As the story moves forward, the reader realizes there is something mentally wrong with Tess. She refuses to break out of her fantasies and this causes much pain, both physical and emotional, for her younger sister who just wants to grow up. The book alternates between past and present, allowing the reader to experience Lizzie's childhood with her unpredictable sister, and showing us how Lizzie and her family are still dealing with the death of Tess. The book is also spattered with fantastical poetry written by Tess which helps illustrate the chapters nicely. Though at times the wording in

the poetry felt a little mature, even for a precocious eleven-year-old, it didn't bother me. This is a book that could very easily be passed over since it does deal with some darker subject matter, but in my opinion, it's one that should not be missed.

(Review based on an Advanced Reader's Copy courtesy of the publisher via NetGalley)

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**Jessie (Ageless Pages Reviews) says**

**Read This Review & More Like It On My Blog!**

*Without Tess* is a whirlwind of a novel - running the gamut from emotional to sweet to disturbing, all easily within a few pages. It's a forthright and honest look at youth, childhood, grief and mental illness without shying away from darker moments or themes. Told in the very real voice of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Cohen, the first-person perspective makes the events of the novel with Tess much more personal, much more visceral for the reader than a more removed third-person omniscient would have done. This super-involving story of Lizzie's life and of Tess's death is compelling and a must-read. This is a novel that was hard for me to read, but I never once felt like giving up on it.

Born two years before Lizzie, Tess is the center of the book around which everyone else operates. The relationship between the two girls is the most central and important one of the entire book: one does not feel whole without the other, in the beginning. Tess by herself is not a very sympathetic character - she's vibrant, fragile, unique and precocious but she's also removed, sullen and controlling. Ms. Pixley does an incredible job of presenting Tess as sympathetic through the eyes of her sister, but the reader can discern early on that there is just something off about Tess even before Lizzie understands. She's very creative and imaginative, but what is play and make-believe for Lizzie is life for Tess. Lizzie is much more grounded than her sister, from the beginning even as children. Intelligent but not motivated to succeed at school, Lizzie never really recovered from Tess's death - for obvious reasons. Fifteen years old at the time of the novel, Lizzie occasionally comes across as the traumatized ten-year-old she was when Tess killed herself. Lizzie herself is also hard to like, in her present-day incarnation, as opposed to the completely sympathetic and likeable version present in the flashbacks. Sympathy and empathy come easily for the character, but genuine affection was harder to find. Lizzie continually punishes herself for her sister's death, and even carries a journal belonging to Tess as a daily reminder of her guilt and grief.

A series of flashbacks, some quite lengthy and others a tad shorter, shed light upon Tess's problems through her whole life. The flashbacks are so extensive and well-done they present a more rounded picture of Lizzie's life growing up with - and under the thumb of - Tess. I really enjoyed the narrative structure of this novel; the juxtaposition of Lizzie's changing attitudes towards Tess as she ages is realistic, though sad for more-than-valid reasons. Poems from Tess are scattered between chapters relevant to the poem itself and lend an extra air of atmosphere and personality for both the book and Tess herself. Like I said, this can be a hard book to get through - I had to take several breaks because the author pulls no punches with the brutally honest portrayal of Tess and her intense illness.

I did have a few problems while reading *Without Tess*. There's a rather unsubstantiated subplot about religion and searching for God (Tess and Lizzie are Jewish with a very devoutly Catholic friend) that seems completely unnecessary and distracting from the actual plot. The quasi-philosophical wonderings of Tess in the midst of Tess's meltdown burdens the plot and the pacing for the more riveting main story. I found it off-putting when the girls' Christian friends urged them to pray "the right way" etc., and I also found it unreal for

the ages of the girls at the time. Another thing that tried my belief was how the sisters talked/wrote at the time of Tess's death. Both definitely come across as much older than the intended 10/11. Their dialogue is far too mature, as are the themes and ideas of Tess's poetry. They both seemed more in the range of actual teenagers: 16-18 would be a more accurate representation.

Besides the few minor issues I had with this novel, I found *Without Tess* to be a great novel. It's emotionally stirring and completely heartfelt without stinting on the darker moments or glossing over Tess's issues. Lizzie's story might not be the easiest or the most fun to read, but it is rewarding to do so. Pick this one up if you're looking for a young-adult novel that isn't afraid to make you cry, or one to make you think.

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## Caroline Grace says

I picked up *Without Tess* on a whim, desperately searching for something on the Young Adult shelf that I hadn't read or at least sampled. I wasn't expecting much, to be honest -- the book was slimmer than I tend to prefer, and the summary sounded cliche, if moderately intriguing. Needless to say, however, this book surprised me.

### Story

The main storyline deals with Lizzie Cohen, a fifteen year old still struggling with the death of her vibrant sister, Tess. Through flashback, we are offered a glimpse at their lives -- into childish games involving flying horses, selkies, and werewolves, and more importantly, into the relationship between the two.

When the flashbacks begin, Lizzie is a shy nine year old girl who absolutely idolizes her sister, even putting herself in danger to prove her love. As the sisters grow, however, we see Lizzie begin to mature and grow socially, while Tess remains the same, obsessed with her fantastic worlds and delusions.

Quite honestly, I was shocked by the darkness of the story and the unflinching way with which it deals with childhood-onset mental illness. It is a very emotional novel, honestly leaving me speechless at some points, and the style definitely complements this -- the way the author weaves fantastic imagery with the reality of Lizzie's life is just gorgeous.

On the subject of style, little snippets of Tess's poetry is interspersed throughout the narrative passages, and for as much as I loathe poetry in YA, it worked very well here. The poems themselves were well-written (very Tess!), and through them, we were able to glimpse the more macabre areas of Tess's mind.

### Characters

**Lizzie** is, of course, our main character. As a teenager, she is rather cynical and guarded, and though I felt it very easy to sympathize with her, I found it hard to connect on a deeper level. Luckily, however, her childhood self is amiable and interesting to read about, so there isn't too much to complain about. She works as a protagonist, and that's the important part.

**Tess** herself is quite the enigma. She is magical and she is dangerous, a character to be pitied and shied away from. Regardless of what you think of her, however, she holds an incredible presence in the novel, even in the scenes following her death. If I may be so bold, this presence -- the subtle imbalance lurking under the surface of childhood wonder, the equal balance of sisterly love and manipulation -- really carries the storyline.

The minor characters, as well, were fantastic. Isabella and Niccolo, along with Lizzie's psychologist, added something pivotal that helped us understand our main characters. More importantly, they were consistent and well-written! It's rare to find a good supporting cast in YA these days, so I really can't stress enough how happy this made me.

### Criticisms

- The ending. Everything seemed to wrap up a bit too neatly to fit with the 'pull-no-punches' realism of the rest of the novel. I suppose it's alright if you're a fan of romance and unquestioningly happy endings, but it bothered me.

- The subplot regarding religion wasn't necessarily a bad thing in my mind (very interesting points were explored without promoting or degrading either Christianity or Judaism), but it felt a little underdeveloped and out of place to me.

Despite its flaws, this book is extraordinary, mostly because of the (fairly revolutionary) topic and, for the most part, fantastic execution. **5/5**

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### J. says

I'd read a book or two in the past with a supposedly similar storyline. Younger sister loses queen bee older sister and younger sister is completely broken. Usually this means the younger sister has no self-confidence and left in a hero-worship position, unable to see her own strengths. And usually it gets a little DepressMe Street and whiny for my tastes. But I decided, hey, whatev, I'll try this.

Wow. Rarely does a book have me put my foot in my mouth this much.

To say that this book was exquisitely beautiful would be to sort of hit the mark. I read this book in a matter of hours simply because I could NOT put it down. When I did, I was still caught in the strange, beautiful and demented world of Lizzie and Tess.

I am such a sucker for beautiful language and descriptions. On page 9, Pixley threw me headfirst into the fantasy world of the sisters, brimming with pure creativity and imagination. I was seduced immediately. She not only created a beautiful world for the sisters, but her reality was a thing of awe as well. I like to say that a good book's descriptions make me see the place, but here, I just didn't see it, I was there. I could see the fading light on a rocky beach. Smell the rotting stench of dead crabs. Taste the salty crunch. Everything beautiful and disgusting from the Cohen sisters' world. All of this is dotted with strangely and hauntingly Victorian-sounding poetry written by a dead 12-year-old girl.

Don't mistake this book for something of childhood innocence. It was strongly reminiscent of Dia Reeves' Slice of Cherry with the childish disassociation of reality and morality. Never for a second do you get the feeling that everything is perfect and wonderful in the lives of these young pre-teens. Like any good, morbid fairytale, there is something sick and demented creeping along with the carefree innocence that makes it just a hint of terrifying.

The story cuts back and forth between the past and the present. The present being where Lizzie has become a deeply guilted, bitterly sarcastic and ultimately realistic 15-year-old girl who converses with no one but her ever-patient therapist.

There aren't many books that I read on the computer and I know I NEED to own, but I am pretty sure, I

NEED to own this. It's just that good and it's use of language is immaculate. This is a very fast read, but I highly, highly recommend it. Especially if you're a fan of Dia Reeves.

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### **Shelleyræ at Book'd Out says**

Without Tess is a haunting tale of mental illness, grief and survival. The blurring of imagination and reality in childhood is one of it's immense joys, I remember pretending I was a mermaid while swimming and hoping to find fairies in the garden. Eventually most of us lose that sense of possibility but in this novel, Tess retreats into her fantasies and is lost.

Alternating between the present and the past we learn of fifteen year old Lizzie's overwhelming guilt and grief over her lost childhood relationship with her sister, Tess. At ten Lizzie idolises her older sister, Tess is bold and imaginative and their play is characterised by make-believe. As the sister's story unravels it becomes obvious to the reader that Tess is mentally ill especially as their innocent play becomes something dark and sinister. Eager to please her eleven year old sister, Lizzie lets herself be drawn into Tess's games but is never sure if Tess is only pretending or really believes her wild fantasies. The tension builds as Lizzie's confusion grows and Tess's behaviour becomes more outlandish.

I thought Pixely captured Lizzie's struggle with her sister's behaviour realistically. She is on the cusp of maturity where a child still longs for magic even though they know it doesn't really exist. The emotional and intellectual conflict for Lizzie is intense and as a child she is torn by her loyalty to Tess and her growing awareness of what is accepted behaviour. I didn't find it all surprising that at fifteen Lizzie was still unable to reconcile her feelings about her late sister, particularly when the issue of her Tess's illness was ignored at home both before and after her death.

Tess is revealed through Lizzie's memories and the legacy she left in the form of a journal. The author skilfully and cleverly reveals how Tess's imagination slides inexorably into delusion. The reader is aware before Lizzie is that there is something wrong with Tess. I watched a documentary on childhood psychosis not too long ago and I feel the author really captured the eerie demeanor and thought processes of a mentally ill child. I sympathised with Tess, a mere child dealing with psychosis that probably frightened her almost as much as Lizzie, but I was simultaneously creeped out by her.

The first person point of view gives is a sometimes odd mix of childish naivety and maturity but the language of Without Tess is lyrical. Tess's poetry from her journal precedes each chapter, with each piece more disturbing, adding to the atmosphere of the novel. The pacing is perfect, building slowly to the tragic conclusion without ever losing tension.

Without Tess is labeled as YA but I think in general it is best suited to an older reader but I can see great value in this novel for teens of any age who have a mentally ill sibling. Without Tess is a compelling read that examines a difficult subject in a sensitive yet honest manner.

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