



Dream School

Blake Nelson

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Andrea Marr—heroine of the classic 90's novel *Girl*—is back. And she's at college!

Imagining a typical “J. Crew/college catalogue” experience, Andrea leaves Portland to attend prestigious Wellington College in Connecticut. Surrounded by the best and the brightest, she works hard to adjust and keep up.

But Andrea has a way of finding her own people—not the well-heeled and well-scrubbed—but the weird, the wild, and the brilliant.

It isn't long before her college career veers wildly off course. Suddenly her entire future is in question. But in her darkest hour, Andrea will find the key to her own destiny.

Dream School Details

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From Reader Review Dream School for online ebook

P. says

I knew it would be overdue at the library, but I really wanted to read this, so I took it on my weekend trip and read it on a train ride. Good decision, me!

At first I was apprehensive and it took me a bit to get into Andrea's head again. She's kind of disassociated in her first semester at Wellington and that made it harder for me to jump into the narrative. For instance, she mentions at one point that she's wearing some thrifted Keds on a date, and she says she bought them at a place she found but nothing more, and I was like, Andrea, why didn't you tell me about how you found that place or when you went there? And I was afraid that our friendship wasn't as close as it normally was, and that going to college would drive us apart. Especially when Doc Martens is misspelled.

But I shouldn't have worried, because she gets back into form. I've never read a better or realer fictional description of becoming a writer. I love the non-traditional ending. There aren't as many show scenes in this book as in *Girl*, but when there are I remember how good Nelson is at describing live music. Aaaaaand.... yeah. I still don't have a mental picture of what Andrea looks like and I kind of like that.

(Despite watching the terrible movie adaptation of *Girl* last week and having to block it all out of my mind so it wouldn't seep into my memories of the book. Not that it's anything but superficially related to the book. Don't watch it. Or do! To laugh at it, and admire Summer Phoenix. But don't be afraid to read this book like I was.)

Some of my most quotable favorite parts:

"It was weird to realize that this whole scene had just continued along. While we had been locked up in libraries, obediently preparing for the future." (51)

"Later, Vanessa and I walked over to Fusion and went upstairs and knocked on some people's doors and, sure enough, Amy was living there. She wasn't in her room though so we couldn't see it. But just being upstairs at Fusion was pretty strange. The girl that talked to us was dressed all in silver. And not for a party or something. She was dressed all in silver *sitting alone in her room.*" (115)

Hillary says

Andrea Marr is back, in this sequel to "Girl" that works perfectly fine as a stand-alone title.

Her same stream of consciousness relaying of the daily minutia of her life and having it turn into a pretty entertaining novel have transferred from high school to her first years at prestigious, east coast Wellington College. Her social life encompassed by the Portland music scene has been supplanted by the college, coming of age experience in all its self-unaware, self-obsessed ways. She's still witty, observant, honest and funny in the most age appropriate ways and Blake Nelson still did what he does best, which is writing the authentic young adult voice.

Kelly Hager says

This is the sequel to *Girl* and details Andrea Marr's life at college (specifically a very exclusive college on the East Coast).

If you read *Girl*, you probably will stop reading this review at "This is the sequel to *Girl*..."

Dream School came out last year and the only reason I waited so long to read it is because I didn't know it existed. (Seriously, universe, how could you keep us apart for so long?!?) *Girl* was one of my favorite books in high school and I read it for the first time right before my own freshman year, and I figured that was what high school was like. And I'll be honest, I was a little disappointed that it wasn't at all representative of my own experience.

Now I've read *Dream School* (which is Andrea's freshman through junior years of college) several years after my own college life and again---not at all my own experience. How does Andrea get all the good stories?

Oh, Andrea Marr, best heroine EVER. She has no idea who she is, so she keeps trying on identities and discarding them when they aren't quite right. She flits from self-concept to self-concept and she doesn't quite get that it's okay to be who she is and that she doesn't need to live up to some sort of ideal college experience.

This isn't quite as good as *Girl* (although it may be that I am too old for this now) but it's still wonderful to spend a few hours with Andrea Marr. And I hope to see what happens next for her. I'm pretty sure it'll be quite the adventure.

(Also---very disappointed that while Cybil and Rebecca showed up, there was no Todd Sparrow.)

Kelly says

Andrea Marr, I would travel back to 1994 to be your best friend (if you wanted me to, that is). Knowing you'd be a librarian after this book takes place only solidifies how much I adore you.

So, *Dream School* is the follow up to *Girl* and it's Andrea going off to the big East fancy pants school and she's excited because she's going to do Big Things and she's going to Change because that's what going to one of those schools does to a girl. She's taking classes, meeting people, making films with the art kids, and she's writing. But the last part is totally her own and she's not all that confident about it because those professors don't really get it. She's not really good at school and the classes bore her but she is DETERMINED to Experience it All.

What I wholeheartedly love in this novel is Andrea's voice. It's so much clearer and brighter than in *Girl*, and it makes sense it would be. But the thing is it's also so confused and lost in the same way it was in *Girl*. All along the way, though, she's getting it, even if she doesn't want to. She's rebelling against everything she expects will happen to her at Wellington while embracing who she is at the same time.

I was on board with the whole story and loved the entire ride and then (view spoiler).

Somehow Nelson nails what it's like inside the mind of a girl. He does it better than most female writers.

Sure the book is set in 1994 but it never once feels like it's a book set then. It feels as real and honest to growing up and figuring life out NOW. Maybe even more so.

I would put this book in a young adult collection, right along with *Girl*, but it's one that's definitely for the older YA set (and older, of course). There are very visual descriptions of drug use and I guess what was sort of jarring about it was how raw and real it felt. The story doesn't in any way condone these things -- and in fact, despite Andrea's participation in it, she's reluctant and honest about feeling it's all some kind of weird status symbol rather than anything meaningful (view spoiler).

I loved every second of reading this book. Each time I picked it up, it reminded me of something in my own life or reminded me of something in one of my friend's lives and I knew what everyone would be getting for the holidays this year.

Marian says

The first time I read this book was when Figment posted it on their website in installments. I was a freshman at the time and really identified with some of the stuff Andrea was going through, although my life was in no way as interesting as hers. I was really happy to hear that physical copies of *Dream School* were in the works and the first thing that caught my eye was the cover. To me, it just screams college Andrea.

Something that I love about all of Blake Nelson's books is the way he develops characters and an aspect that this novel really captures is that college changes people. In the beginning Andrea is very similar to what she was like in high school where she sits back and casually observes. But college changes her quickly. And while she does make some poor choices throughout her freshman and sophomore years, she's never truly unlikeable because she learns from her mistakes.

Girl was set in the 90's and even though this novel was published over a decade later, I liked that no time seemed to pass. Andrea still likes to go to thrift stores and she and her friend Carol discuss bands and zines that they like. There's no real time jump.

The ending is a bit of a cliff hanger. In interviews Blake Nelson has talked about possibly expanding Andrea's story into a third book, and I think that would be amazing.

Kyra Leseberg (Roots & Reads) says

Girl is the coming of age book that I read at the perfect time in my life and it was like magic. I still have my tattered copy on a shelf highlighted in magic marker with folded pages and notes in the margins. Unfortunately, reading this sequel 17 years later felt like a chore and it failed to hold my interest.

Alison says

Blake Nelson's *Girl* was, along with *The Virgin Suicides*, (also excerpted in *Sassy*, if I remember correctly?) one of the first books (if not *thee* first), that opened the world of non-school reading to me and got me excited about books and literature.

This is not to mention the fact that I was the narrator, Andrea's, age and also getting into bands and trying to figure out my own identity—one that was strongly connected to music—at the time the book came out. And I was a diary-writer and loved how the prose read so much like a diary (or at least how I wrote in mine), in the way Andrea recorded or reported the minutiae that somehow felt important, as well as the important stuff that's just kind of tossed off. *And* I was obsessed with the fact that a guy wrote *Girl*.

Over the years I've followed Blake Nelson's career (or so I thought).

But a couple weeks back I was in Portland (my first time ever in that city), drifting through Powell's with my cousin (whom I was visiting, and to whom I recommended *Girl* when she was younger), not even thinking about the local connection to Blake Nelson, but picking up different books and asking my cousin if she'd read them.

All of a sudden we swung around into a different aisle and there was Blake Nelson looking at me, or at least a picture of him on this little card next to his books, and there was a new book by him that I hadn't heard about, and when I picked it up I yelled out loud that, OMG, it was a sequel to *Girl*!

But then, almost immediately, I was scared: would this book somehow ruin *Girl*? Like, in a corporate, sellout kind of way? Would I regret reading it because of what he did to the character(s), (like the way I felt when watching a movie by writer/director Todd Solon in which he revisits the characters from *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and I wanted to kill him for what he did to them)? But, perhaps more importantly: How did I not know there was a sequel?!?

I plowed through the book during this trip to Portland, and here are some of my thoughts upon finishing it:

-There was so much about college life I could relate to, especially how Andrea drifts, socially, from semester-to-semester, the way people come in and out of your life with the seasons and how each of those periods define you. And I, too, went to a small, private college, (where I took classes with titles similar to Andrea's, and experienced the inanity of the creative writing classes--though the similarities, due to my sheltered and rural life [even in college], stop there).

-Since I was on vacation and therefor couldn't just reach for my (worn and well-loved) copy of *Girl*, my sense that Andrea's voice was still in tact was one I just had to trust, rather than through true comparison (but perhaps that's a good thing). But it seemed to pick right up with the Andrea I remember without skipping a beat all these years later.

-At first I was a little disappointed that there weren't more 90s pop culture references, since, again, I lived through the time this book takes place (and was starting college right around the same time as Andrea). There's, like, a passing reference to Hootie and the Blowfish, to Doc Martens, etc. But then as the book progressed, I was thankful that the story was devoid of these kinds of references, because, getting back to that "corporate" reference I made above... I think a lesser writer could have veered off into a surface remembrance of the 90s, i.e., Andrea would've been obsessed with Kurt Cobain and wearing flannel.

-And, because I turned 35 this summer, I couldn't help but read the book through the adult lens and wonder the whole time if I would've been more overwhelmed by the whole thing if I'd had it in my hands right after

experiencing *Girl* when it first came out, as I myself was going through freshman year of college (or any year of college).

-One small, specific criticism I have, that doesn't relate to *Girl* or the other ancillary 90s/culture/relatability stuff, is that I often had a hard time distinguishing between the characters of Andrea's friends. Nelson does provide defining characteristics for them, and they're believable and intriguing—one's a budding film-maker, another is the daughter of a noted professor and intellectual—but I wished I had written a sort of cheat sheet for who was who on an index card so that each time Andrea mentioned one of them, I'd know which was which. (Did anyone else find that these characters kind of melded together a little bit?)

All in all, however, the story held up on its own. I think I would've loved it more if I'd been reading it as a kid. So, while this book might not be as life-changing for me (unless it does, in the end, inspire me to keep trying at writing YA fiction, which is how I feel right now!), it was heartening to have more of Andrea (and that Blake Nelson picked her up right where she left off, rather than finding her in present day as a suburban soccer mom. My own bias, for sure, but a relief all the same.)

Jenny says

I ate up this sequel to the 90s YA indie rock classic, *GIRL*, in surreptitious bites at work (the online serial format makes this easy). This seems fitting - like something Andrea Marr in her 30s might be doing herself.

But be prepared for the onslaught of teen-angsty melodrama told in embarrassingly authentic detail - the combination took me back to my own coming-of-age days as a moody suburban high school kid, and then a (still-moody, but then also) wide-eyed pretend-sophisticate in first-year university. Because you will get caught up in a storm of hormones and despair and excitement about music, and boys, and art, and scenes, and existential questions about the nature of *coolness* and the impossibility of defining or knowing what is truly *cool*, etc etc... and then you will find yourself disoriented and way too worked up when someone comes into your office to remind you about a meeting.

Still, worth it.

Courtney Sieloff says

I literally ate this book. I just finished *Girl* last night, which I had never read before. I got this book as a gift and felt like I needed to read *Girl* first. I sat down, read *Girl*, then read this entire book. I was nearly late to work this morning because I needed to finish it. Now that I've spent all of high school and college with Andrea, I am sort of annoyed there isn't another book waiting for me, to find out what happens next. The writing style grew up in this book, which makes sense after the stream of consciousness/high school patterns of the first book. The honesty in which this character is developed is amazing - it's all the little judgments and thoughts that we have but never normally vocalize, which makes Andrea a real person. Here's hoping there is a follow up book soon!

Sarah says

I wanted this to be a great sequel and I went into it with high hopes. But where *Girl* was successful this fell flat. It tried too hard right away - name dropping Nirvana, zines, and riot grrrls within like, the first two pages. And it could have redeemed itself but it didn't; it felt throughout that instead of trying to be in an era, it was trying so very hard to subscribe to one. And whereas Andrea's high school experiences had some universal mid-90's charm inherent in them, I can't say as much for her college years, which were frankly kind of boring for me. This book also made me realize a problem I had with *Girl* - that many of the other people that populate the book, including Andrea's family, are practically faceless and nameless. There's very little effort in either book invested in specifying people or bringing them to life. In *Girl* this was not the case for a few key characters - Cybil and Matthew, specifically. But in *Dream School* it was unfortunately the case throughout. Hal, Carol, and Vanessa were the most interesting choices here for me, and even at the very end of the book they still just felt like silhouettes. I realized, too, that I was hoping and hoping for Cybil to come back and for there to be continuation there - it could have even saved the story for me if done right. But it was a blip, reduced to five minutes and a quarter of a page with zero emotional resonance. And in the end it was Andrea herself who should have carried the story, and who I should have cared about, and instead I think she's just dull. Oh, and the ending. One-trick pony much?

Lindsay Heller says

I obviously only read this book because I loved '*Girl*' when I was a girl. The story about Andrea Marr discovering a world outside the mundane filled with art, music, and people with different ideas and thoughts really appealed to me because that's the same kind of person I was. We left her in 1994 Portland, Oregon. Now she's back and she's going to college. Specifically East Coast liberal arts haven, Wellington in Connecticut. There Andrea meets a new breed, the J. Crew wearing, typical prepster concerned with trust funds and acing their difficult workload. But soon Andrea meets some like minded friends and becomes involved in film making as she and her friends push the envelope to find a true experience. But those don't always come free and soon Andrea's life plan might be a little more smudgey than she had ever thought.

I wanted to like this book a lot more than I did. I like Andrea, and I like things that take place at small New England liberal arts colleges. It seems like a perfect match. But, perhaps I've just outgrown Andrea and her brand of wishy washiness. I remember as stronger, as someone who found something new and threw herself into a new life, a real life, full throttle. Here she just seems to go with the flow. Yes, arriving at college is scary as shit, but that doesn't mean latching to the first person you see for the rest of your college career. A lot of this story was going through Andrea's day to day life. That can be good, but I'm not sure it was here, because a lot of her day to day life really wasn't that interesting at all.

And in the end it didn't really seem as if Andrea learned anything at all. She moved on with her life, as people must, but it came off more as just doing the next thing rather than learning from mistakes or discovering what it is she really wants. What does she want? In the end, I had no idea and I am fairly sure that she doesn't either. But, sure, she's in her early twenties, she's not meant to have it figured out. Still, unless Nelson decides to continue this story further we're left with a very unsatisfying ending to what was once a satisfying book. There's not much *Dream-y* here.

Stephanie says

Aww! 1994-1996ish. You were so delightful. This book takes me back to the perils of dorm life -- bad boyfriend decisions, bad alcohol and bad 90s jeans. Loved the book. Nothing earth-shattering. Just plain enjoyable.

laaaaames says

EFF YEAH ANDREA MARR.

(read: 79 - also I must admit I reread GIRL before I started DREAM SCHOOL and I'm glad I did because, man, this character is just one of my favorites. Please write Number Three, Blake, please.)

Lisa says

Blake Nelson's 1994 novel "Girl" remains one of the defining moments of my reading life. Andrea Marr was everything I wanted to be back then: effortlessly cool, edgy, a mix of good girl and bad. And I remember being unnerved at how completely Nelson could get inside a teenage girl's head. I pined for a sequel, then sort of forgot about it, and 17 years later it was suddenly just here, like a gift.

So there was really no way this book could live up to my hopes. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it - it's smart and fast and astute, and Andrea's life at an elite New England college rings completely true. But there's something about the voice that feels off. She seems younger and more credulous than she did in "Girl." Parts feel forced. Others try too hard. I'm sure the 17-year gap made the gears a little rusty. Unfortunately, it shows.

Also, two things really bugged and took away from my enjoyment: first, the many and egregious typos (did anyone proofread?). And second, way! too! many! exclamation! points! Andrea was never that lame.

Cat says

I was afraid to read "Dream School" for fear that it wouldn't be the unpretentious, confused, honest badassery that is the Andrea Marr we met in Girl.

Turns out I shouldn't have doubted Blake Nelson. "Girl" is one of those books that has such a perception altering effect that it mirrors a drug. You read it over and over hoping for that same high, but it never reaches quite the level you were hoping for when you already know what's going to happen. "Dream School" is a gift because it allows you to achieve that initial height of anticipation once more, with the knowledge that you will not be disappointed in the end.

The ending hints at a sequel. Fingers crossed that it will come out before I myself leave college!

