



Feral Youth

Polly Courtney

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The truth is, it ain't just a race thing. They talk like it is, but really and truly it's black against white, young against old, authorities against the rest. It's countless of things. There's bare reasons for feeling vexed right now.

Growing up on a south London estate and excluded from every school that would take her, Alesha is the poster girl for the nation's 'feral youth'.

When a young teacher makes an unexpected reappearance in the 15-year-old's life, opening the door to a world of salaries, pianos and middle-class housemates, Alesha's instinct is to pull up her hood and return to the streets.

But fuelled by a need to survive, she falls into a cycle of crime, violence and drug-dealing, her one true ally deserting her when she needs him most. While everyone around her is rallying against the authorities in a war of haves and have-nots, Alesha finds herself caught in the crossfire, inextricably linked to the people she is trying to fight against.

Can she see a way out? And as riots sweep the nation, whose side will she take?

Born in South London and a resident of Ealing, an area affected by the London riots, Polly wrote *Feral Youth* 'to give a voice to the thousands of frustrated youths who, like Alesha, feel marginalised and ignored by the rest of society'. She believes that the real causes of the riots have not gone away and that further unrest will happen in a matter of time. *Feral Youth* is a work of contemporary adult fiction that covers various topical themes, including the riots, youth culture, gangs and knife and gun crime. It is aimed primarily at the adult reader and provides an alternative perspective on a world we think we know.

Feral Youth Details

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From Reader Review Feral Youth for online ebook

Neil Gilbert says

What if someone offered you a free book in exchange for an honest review?

Some people would be like "no way, I'm not selling out to the Man! I'm gonna buy my own books and have my own opinions and it's none of your business!"

Well suit yourself rebel bookworm.

I said "I'll take it"

Then I read it.

This what I thought:

Feral Youth left claw marks on my soul as I struggled through life in the mind of Alesha. Anyone caught in the cycle of crime and poverty can attest to the fact that, as freeing and healthy as a "legit" life might be, changing fate is a heart wrecking business. Caring for someone in that position is just as difficult. The desperation of Alesha being born and un-raised, unloved and alone was hard to stomach, however, hope was balanced precariously on top of the dirty, sweaty, blood stained words and the conclusion to the book was a calm, quiet note in the air. I rushed through it. I liked it. I would recommend it. I would give it five stars but I'm worried I'll look like a sell-out.

Hannah Wingfield says

(The following review first appeared on my book blog text).

★★★★★ (5 stars)

A couple of weeks ago author Polly Courtney contacted me to ask whether I would be interested in receiving a free copy of this book in exchange for a fair review. I was excited, and flattered (I've been writing this little blog for almost two years now and this was my first freebie!) so of course said yes, not least because the story appealed to me (I'm not sure I'd jump at the chance to review a football-based tale). As I picked up the novel and prepared to read however I was slightly wary - what if I didn't like it, and had to write a negative review I knew the author would read? What if I loved it and everyone thought I had sold out? Well, I happened to love it, but I can assure you I haven't sold out - it just happens to be a great book!

Set in London two years ago, Feral Youth looks at Alesha, a fictional young person involved in the riots, and tries to explain what might have motivated her to take part. Much of the novel does not depict the riots themselves, and this I thought was a clever way to represent that although decisions made by people on the day of the riots ultimately drove them to participate, those decisions were undoubtedly influenced by events that preceded them (and not just in the immediate days and weeks and even months before, but years back - an entire culture of deprivation, alienation, frustration, anger and a feeling of not being listened to). I'm not saying that these factors excuse people's choice to vandalise, steal, hurt others and/or generally, well, riot,

but it is important to consider the reasons why our fellow citizens acted this way. Even if you take a right-wing, hard-line approach to crime - which, admittedly, I don't - surely we can all agree that we don't want riots to happen again, and thus it would be wise to find out why they happened, for prevention if nothing else?

Back to Alesha. She is fifteen, and has spent her childhood on the move between foster homes and her neglectful, emotionally abusive mother (and her mother's emotionally and physically abusive partner, who appears to be the last straw in prompting Alesha to leave home). When the novel opens she is living a quiet(ish) life with her good friend JJ (I've seen other reviews describing him as her boyfriend, but to me their relationship felt much more like one of brother and sister, having grown up together and being very loyal to each other, but with an absence of romance) and his Nan, who has dementia. Social services decide that Nan is no longer able to live in the community and JJ and Alesha (who aren't officially residing at Nan's anyway) find themselves homeless. School drop-outs, they bounce from house to house, using illegal means to gather their day-to-day funds as, being under sixteen, they are unable to claim benefits (and can make a lot more cash through other means even when they do become legal adults).

A young teacher, Helen Merfield, who instructed Alesha on the piano at her penultimate school, is mugged on the estate Alesha lives on and puts out word that she will pay a reward to anyone who returns the ring that was stolen from her. Alesha, spying a money-making opportunity but also genuinely wanting to assist, gets in touch with Miss Merfield and they strike up a relationship. Throughout the novel Alesha is torn between the world of the streets (or "endz" as she refers to them) and "going legit" with the assistance of Miss Merfield, who tries to utilise all the available official channels to support Alesha and to motivate her into getting a job. She is shocked, however, at how limited the support on offer is, and this is perhaps why she is understanding of Alesha's frequent returns to less legal ways of living and raising funds.

Feral Youth takes the reader deep into the hidden world of inner city gangs, explaining only too well why young people can feel like they have little choice but to affiliate themselves with one (like carrying a knife, it just feels too unsafe not to.) and to use illegal and/or dangerous means to secure their incomes (when benefits are so meagre, and jobs so scarce, it's unsurprising that many would rather sell drugs - or themselves. I'm not saying this excuses it, but until you've been in that situation - with that set of past experiences - yourself it's very easy to sit back and judge without knowing if you'd be able to resist the same temptations). Alesha talks a lot about survival, and as you follow her life it's easy to see that she has to live hour-to-hour. When Miss Merfield tries to support her to go legit it becomes evident that all these safe, legal, ways to get money and/or places to live require much more time investment than their underworld counterparts, and being able to stick to a plan for more than a day or so is very difficult for someone in Alesha's situation. The fact Alesha's entire life has been defined by constant change (and change that is often outwith her control, e.g. being transferred from school to school, and foster home to foster home) also explains why she might feel more at home with life on the streets than by going to college and applying for jobs, saving for a flat and all that sensible stuff.

As you can guess, I liked Alesha a lot. She had a soft side too, despite the crimes she perpetrates - she doesn't want to hurt those she loves, or those she sees as unable to stand up for themselves (she holds back from stealing from disabled people, and mums - yeah, yeah, I know, she shouldn't be stealing at all). And her "voice" is believable - I truly felt like I was living her life alongside her as I read Feral Youth (Polly Courtney includes a glossary at the beginning of the book to "translate" some of Alesha's slang for the less streetwise reader, although there were still a few words I had to look up online because I am old and uncool). She is a teenager - impulsive, prone to black-and-white, all-or-nothing, thinking; and didn't always make the decisions I'd have liked her to make - but I still cared about her and had empathy for the difficult choices she faced.

Feral Youth's other characters were largely peripheral and often glimpsed only fleetingly, here and there, but Miss Merfield was believable and provided someone for adult, non-gang-member readers to relate to, as well as having largely-unexplored depths and difficulties of her own (which highlighted that life is not as easy for those who live outside "the endz" as Alesha thinks it is). The whole teacher-forms-a-special-bond-with-pupil story has been done before (for example in Kate Long's The Daughter Game, as well as in numerous movies) but this particular execution of the trope did not feel cliched, perhaps because it took place outside a school setting, or because it did not end with Miss Merfield single-handedly saving Alesha from gang life and poverty.

I only have two slight reservations/questions about Feral Youth. One is that some of the practical/bureaucratic aspects of the plot were not entirely convincing: e.g. fifteen-year-old Alesha is given a room in a hostel by her local authority's housing department (being under the legal age of adulthood she would surely have to be accommodated in a children's home or foster placement?) and no-one seems to care too much at all that although she is supposed to be living with her mum she actually hadn't done for several months (maybe this is how things happen and I'm just too sheltered to realise. But I have friends who work in children/young people's services, albeit in more rural areas than this, and they keep much better track of "their" young people). The other, bigger issue, was with me throughout my reading and that was the unspoken knowledge that Polly Courtney, accomplished writer though she is*, is not a mixed-race teenage girl living in inner city London. Of course writers don't have to only "write what they know", but I do wonder what an actual inner city teenager, a real-life Alesha, would think of Feral Youth? Would they say it was realistic? How would they feel about a person with many more privileges than them writing about their lifestyles, however respectfully it was done? Would they be glad to be given a voice, or angry that, yet again, someone is speaking for them? This is something I still feel ambivalent about, days after finishing the novel. *Allow me to take this opportunity to mention, perhaps randomly, that I loved the way the passage of time was handled in this novel. Sometimes we followed Alesha closely for days, other times a few weeks would elapse between chapters, but it always felt seamless.

Polly Courtney evidently put time into researching Feral Youth by talking to teenagers and has a lot of respect for them and the dilemmas they face. It certainly raises awareness of gang culture, poverty and a whole host of related issues, and (I hope) will prompt people to think of compassionate solutions to these challenges. I highly recommend Feral Youth to fans of realistic fiction and/or novels featuring teenagers, and anyone who wants to learn more about the real divides in privilege within the UK today.

A copy of this book was sent by the publisher in exchange for a fair review.

Laura Besley says

Alesha, the main character of this novel, is awesome; she totally gets under your skin and in between reads I found myself thinking about her and wondering how she was going to get on. This is set in a world unfamiliar to me, but it was painted in a very realistic way and I become totally immersed. Exploring themes of love, loyalty and violence, this is a thoroughly enjoyable, yet thought-provoking, read.

Ali George says

Feral Youth is set against the backdrop of the London Riots and looks at the causes of those riots through the

eyes of fifteen year old Alesha. The idea is to present the side of the rioters (who you may remember were woefully underrepresented in the media coverage at the time), not by painting them as victims but by examining gang culture, poverty and other social issues. A noble cause indeed, and it's definitely worth a look.

The story is a bit slow to get going – I felt there was a little too much set up, and during the first four chapters sometimes found myself quite distracted by the language because it didn't always feel natural. The author obviously did a lot of research to get the slang right, but it took a while to get into the flow of it – I felt it started to come together better when the pace of the story picked up. I also felt the explanation of how a kid like Alesha (too poor and neglected to even finish school) ended up taking piano lessons should have been given a little earlier, because I spent a long time feeling like the character of Miss Merfield was somewhat contrived. However, as the story and their relationship progresses, all becomes clear.

In some ways Alesha is one of the best-drawn teenagers I've ever come across, but that actually makes her quite difficult to empathise with. She is as stubborn, moody and judgmental as all fifteen year old girls are, but whilst she's undoubtedly had an incredibly tough life her constant mood swings and claims that nobody else can possibly understand her can get a bit wearing. I'd be interested to get some perspectives from some of the other characters – JJ would be the most obvious as her best friend, but piecing together bits of the story as seen by Twitch, Ash or Vinny would have been interesting. In light of the emphasis on gang culture and how people end up involved with it, it would also have been illuminating to see something of the inner thoughts of two dimensionally awful Tremaine Bell.

Having said all that, the fact I'm interested enough in the characters to want to hear their points of view points to the fact this is a good story, and it's one that asks questions and gives the reader something to think about. There are some points where the author wears her research on her sleeve a bit and the result is a little jarring, but to be fair this is quite reflective of the subject matter.

Worth a look, particularly for those who took media coverage of the events in 2011 at face value.

Jason Beech says

I've been putting a lot of books down, lately, sometimes not even getting beyond the fifteenth page. I used to grit teeth and roll my eyes to the end no matter what, but I'm now losing patience.

Cheers, then, to Polly Courtney for a great read in *Feral Youth*, about a fifteen year old black girl, Alesha, eking out an existence in a London estate ruled by gangs and harassed by the coppers (she calls them the boydem). It's a miserable existence: a daily routine consisting of fronting it to gain respect. Respect is everything, because if you don't have it, you're going to get exploited and that'll be the end of that.

The only thing that warms her and loosens that cold, tight knot in her belly is JJ and his dementia-suffering nan.

Courtney paints a harsh world where one wrong step spells disaster. Alesha runs some packets in an alien area for the Peckham Crew with which she's affiliated. The receivers don't take to her, steal the packet, threaten her with a gun, and leave her in dangerous debt to her own 'crew.' From that moment on her already miserable world collapses as she experiences one disaster after another.

Courtney writes the whole thing in first person, from Alesha's point of view. She has you living in her head, willing her forward, realizing every stupid mistake she makes, but having the reader understand the context. As JJ drifts she looks for something, someone, to anchor her. Alesha's so lonely, so defensive, she sometimes can't think straight. Her mum is useless, effectively abandoning her, she has no clue about her

dad. The authorities have taken JJ's nan into care, rendering JJ and herself homeless. She can only see the past and right now.

Courtney does such a good job in subtly showing how the future doesn't really exist beyond what Alesha's going to eat next, how she's going to get it, how she'll get the money (p's) to live. When Miss Merfield, an old teacher from the school which has since kicked her out, helps, Alesha can't see past her middle-class aura. She likes Miss' luxuries, but she feels nothing but mistrust from a class she feels despises the likes of her. This all sounds like a misery-fest, but there's plenty of humour. The scene in Miss Merfield's lover's kitchen is worth the book's price alone. Miss Merfield's quest to help Alesha, even after the teenager has conned her out of money with a promise to find the teacher's stolen ring, has you fearing for the story.

Fearing that here's a tale about a lower class girl rescued by her social superiors, thus pissing off any of us who grew up on a council estate. Thankfully, Courtney doesn't let it play out like a modern Oliver Twist. There's no monster like Fagin, who for all his evil, still had enough charm to make you like him. The monsters in Feral Youth are monsters, full stop, enticing followers hanging round the gangsters and looking for scraps.

Courtney captures perfectly, through Alesha, what it's like to scrape by, making bad choices because when you can't see a future, you take pleasure where you can and bite your nails at the consequences later. As Alesha would say, "Rah."

The book ends with the recent London riots, the result of bubbling anger which can hardly articulate itself, so is left to the right-wing press to stamp its interpretation on events. No matter Alesha's motives, her stupidity, and righteous anger, she's a fantastic force of nature to follow.

A great read.

Catriona Troth says

Feral Youth is story of Alesha – a fifteen year old from Peckham in South London. At the start of the book, Alesha is living under the radar, dodging social services, gang violence and her alcoholic mother. But she has a roof over her head, a friend she owes everything to, a youth centre that provides an occasional refuge, and a 'rep' that provides some flimsy protection on the streets.

In the course of a few short weeks over the summer of 2011, even those are taken away. No wonder Alesha's angry. Angry enough that when messages start crowding onto her phone, telling her riots are kicking off all over south London, she is ready to take revenge on the whole self-satisfied world she sees around her.

Only, it's beginning to look as if the one person she can really trust isn't from the streets at all. She's Alesha's eccentric former music teacher, Miss Merfield – and she's trying to tell Alesha there's another way out.

There is almost an unspoken rule of writing that you may write as a serial killer or a space pirate or Marie Antoinette – but you don't bust through the barriers of age and class to write a piece of serious contemporary literature from a point of view totally outside your own experience. And Courtney is no street kid. But she has had both the courage to know that rules are there to be broken, and the integrity to see that it must done right. Before she wrote the book, she immersed herself with South London teenagers and those that worked with them, absorbing their speech and learning at firsthand what life on the streets is like. The result is a voice that will haunt you.

Reading Feral Youth brought back all the anger I felt in those weeks following the 2011 riots. At the end of it, I was crying. Aching for the Aleshas of this world. There is no doubt that Alesha is at times her own worst

enemy. There were points where I wanted to reach into the pages of the book and shake her for not saying aloud what is going through her head. But Alesha can't tell anyone about what's happening. Everything in her life has taught her to say nothing, to trust no one.

Like Celie from *The Color Purple*, Alesha is a barely literate teenager reaching out to you from a world most of us would rather pretend doesn't exist. And so long as we go on pretending, it will go on existing – to the shame of us all.

Alison Cubitt says

Rebellion on a South London street

You've seen Alesha – or your children have: she's the one standing in the shadows, watching, hood drawn up – at the bus stop, eyeing up the trainers and the mobile phones. And then one day, a newcomer to the area turns up whose parents are too naïve to know that sending your kid off to school with the latest trainers is asking for it... And that kid is followed by a gang of yoots and he's mugged – all because of Alesha's expert appraisal of how much his shoes might be worth...

By choosing to tell Alesha's story in the first person, Polly Courtney, in her latest novel, *Feral Youth*, takes us deep inside the world of an abandoned 15-year-old, for whom home means living with her boyfriend at his nan's place – with a staffie called GBH completing their little family or fam – in Alesha speak. And then Social Services steps in and decides Nan can't live on her own and puts her in a home. The authorities don't even know Alesha and JJ exist so once again they're back on the streets.

You may have written-off the Aleshas' of this world - the feral youth of the title; but no matter how hard you try to dismiss Alesha's twisted world-view, Polly Courtney reminds us that, once you strip away the prickly exterior, that Alesha is really no different from any other complex, contradictory and bloody-minded teenager. Because one thing's for sure, there's no point in arguing with teenagers. Not only do they have all the answers, but their opinions are the only ones that count. And either it's right or it's wrong. All or nothing. Oh, the arrogance of youth! From Alesha's perspective, what use is it for her to get an education and then a job? Here is Alesha on schoolwork: 'Truth is, I don't see how this book is gonna help me live my life. Is it gonna get me a flat?... What's the point in talking about made-up killings in a made-up book when there's real ones going on down the road?'

And if you're stuck in a run-down estate controlled by gangs, you've got to choose to side with one or the other. Otherwise you'll have no protection when you need it. Just as the pro-gun lobby in the US maintains that to fight violent crime, you fight back with ever more violent weaponry, Alesha applies the same warped reasoning, justifying why she carries a knife.

But then Alesha's world starts to unravel. She is sold out and set up by gang members she assumed were her brethren, not just once but twice and both resulting in brutal attacks. But, you can beat her up and violate her but you can't put Alesha down. Because she picks herself up again, telling herself she still has all the answers.

And then one day her old music teacher comes looking for her and gives Alesha a glimpse of an alternative world and even manages to get her to an interview for a job that pays minimum wage. But the ever resourceful Alesha has other ideas: 'What's the point of working for minimum wage when I can make two

ton a day just by standing still.' Because if there's one tribe that Alesha knows all too well, it's crackheads as her mother is one and so too is JJ's.

The closure of a youth centre because of government cutbacks and the cover-up by the police over the arrest of a gang suspect inflames simmering tensions on the estate. And one summer's evening in 2011, courtesy of instant messaging, kids are told to be in a particular place and one picks up a brick and then another follows.....As the word spreads, suddenly gang affiliations don't matter – nor does race as everyone who is around that evening makes a choice – will they or won't they join the rioters?

Feral Youth is as life-affirming as Trainspotting and will connect with teenagers and adults alike - even if the world you inhabit is, as Alesha describes anywhere outside of London as: 'a tiny dead place made of stone, where there's less to do than there is round here'. Because one thing I do know is that the next time there's an act of youthful rebellion, and the tabloid press and government tries to absolve themselves of all societal responsibility, I don't want to be one of those, nodding in agreement, blaming it all on feral youth.

Feral Youth doesn't pretend that there's a simple answer to youth violence and disengagement; it goes one better than that, challenging us to stop coming up with sound-bite solutions to complex problems.

Chris Curran says

I embarrassed myself on the train back from Brighton yesterday by crying audibly at the end of a novel. And I mean real, tears pouring down your face, crying. The book was Feral Youth.

Polly Courtney takes you so far into the mind of 15 year-old Alesha, as she tries to survive on the run-down estates of Peckham, that you feel as battered, as bruised, and as angry, as Alesha herself. With no home, too young to qualify for benefits and seeing no chance of getting even a low paid job the only bright spot in her life is her friend, her fam, JJ. They've been everything to each other since childhood, but as she sees JJ get deeper and deeper in with the local gang, the Crew, she knows she's losing him too.

As the summer of 2011 heats up so does Alesha's life. She must fight her own corner, stealing, dealing and running deliveries for the Crew. When a delivery goes wrong the story becomes even more brutal and there are times when Alesha loses hope. But she's a stubborn character and, although he can no longer acknowledge her publicly, she still has JJ – at least for now.

Her ex piano teacher Miss Merfield, sees something special in Alesha and tries to help, but she's from another world and Alesha knows she can't even imagine what life on the endz is like. Inevitably Alesha and JJ get involved in the riots of 2011 and Alesha becomes a representative of the kind of feral youth the whole country despises.

How authentic Alesha's story is I'm not qualified to judge, but it feels absolutely real. If I've made it sounds unrelentingly grim, I've done the book a disservice. It is a blistering, angry story, but Alesha, JJ and Miss Merfield are wonderful characters and Alesha's tenacious and bloody minded spirit means we always dare to hope things may work out for her. One thing's for sure, I know I'll be haunted by this book for a long, long time. Highly recommended.

Anthony says

Initial thoughts? A tricky read: quoting from the book: I gived up coz the page was filled with complex words – nearly.

OK, there was a glossary of slang to help. However, it wasn't exhaustive – there were a number of terms left out of the glossary and not explained, e.g. paigon: a friend that lies betrays and isn't true to you. Perhaps that was regarded as already sufficiently well-known to the target audience of young adults. But this 67-year-old reader (grandfather constantly being told that he's out of touch by his children and grandchildren) hadn't heard the term.

Nevertheless, I persevered – mainly as I'd received the book for free on the promise of giving it an honest review.

Understanding the book, aside from merely the words used, required an analysis of motivations: of the young 15-year-old narrator Alesha, Miss Merfield her old music teacher and, ultimately, the author herself.

In reverse order, the author Polly Courtney writes a great story that forcefully drives along making the reader want to hang in to the end. But was there a higher purpose to her writing the book? Another reviewer (Sonya Thomas, Journalist & Researcher) says yes:

'The riots were widely misunderstood. The perception of feral youth causing havoc, driven by nothing more than criminalisation, was mooted from the start and stuck. It meant that the underlying causes such as poverty, broken homes and deprivation, were largely unexamined - this book changes that.'

Examined, yes but explained, no – not to me. As a second generation Irishman raised in the '40s and '50s in Burnage, (yes, famous – or infamous for the Oasis' Gallagher brothers) I experienced, not just 'understood', poverty and deprivation. My father would come from his shift at Manchester Docks to an evening meal of boiled potatoes and gravy – me and my sister having bread & jam and custard every day for tea. I don't want to sound reactionary (truly, I'm far from that) – but I want to exclaim we didn't riot! If this was meant as a social document I'd have liked to have more analysis of why the written-about communities were so much angrier than those from my background.

Understanding young Alesha's motives was easy – survival.

We can't just move out the endz, just like that. If you're stuck in your endz, you're better off affiliating with a crew than going off on your own. Everyone knows that.

And again:

Way I see it, if they make out I'm up to no good, I might as well get up to no good.

Now Miss Merfield's motives were harder to understand. It was implied that she identified with Alesha's plight as she, too, had no mother or father having lost her only surviving parent at the age of 15 – Alesha's age. However, that's where the similarity ended. She would have had to study to qualify as a teacher – she must have stayed within a society so conventional and light years away from Alesha's.

Readers' belief was strained by the teacher's seemingly bottomless purse constantly bailing out money despite being let down and rejected by Alesha. The combination of Alesha having amazing virtuosity to sight-read and play the piano with Miss Merfield constantly playing the Fairy Godmother gave a fairy tale feel to the story which seemed miles away from the gritty reality of the book's setting.

A cracking story – but as a book that is suggested to help the reader ‘understand why so many young people took to the streets two summers ago’ it lacks credibility by its over-neat happy ending.

But hey! All in all, a good read.

Caitriona says

(originally posted on <http://caitrionareviews.blogspot.co.uk/>)

I heard about this book through Movellas, the writing website that I'm also a member of. Often the site will run competitions based on newly-published books, and will release the first few chapters free to give the competitors some inspiration. I obediently read the first chapter - and was instantly hooked. Straight away, I could tell that this was going to be a good one. I even left a comment on the free first chapter that the author herself tweeted about - so I thought, all things considered, I had better read the thing. I even managed to get it while it was still free on Kindle, so I had literally nothing to lose. What do I think having now read it? Well...let's just say that I would happily have paid money for it.

The story follows Alesha, a fierce and angry mixed-race girl from an incredibly impoverished South London estate. She has a troubled past, with an alcoholic mother and an abusive stepfather, but she now lives with her only friend JJ in a flat with his dementia-stricken grandmother. Life is hard, but not unbearable. After she gets expelled from school and - in an incredible stroke of bad luck that will seem to follow this poor girl around - made homeless in the same week, Alesha finds herself financially stranded. In the end she has no choice but to deliver drugs for a terrifying local gang - exactly the kind of people you wouldn't want to cross. So what does she do? She inadvertently crosses them, of course. After a horrific ordeal to show her who's boss, Alesha becomes indebted to the gang. The book then follows her through her attempts to pay off her debts, in a story that will see her experience sympathetic teachers, brutal police officers and the infamous August Riots of 2011.

Let me start off by saying that the entire book is written entirely in street slang, as the barely-literate Alesha can only converse in this dialect. I was worried that it might seem false, or that Courtney would use it clumsily, incorrectly or far too much. None of these suspicions were confirmed. Not only did Alesha's voice stand out and keep her engaging, but it felt real. Like this fascinating character was actually talking to me from behind the pages of the novel. In fact, after the whole Twitter thing and having never read anything by her before, I did a bit of investigating and found that Ms Courtney is actually a very interesting person. She is a former City banker who found her calling as a writer after penning *Golden Handcuffs*, a revealing novel about what life is really like for junior investment bankers. This set her off on a streak of writing about topics that are very much ignored, but that deserve to be brought into the open - for instance, her second novel *Poles Apart* addresses the injustices towards the influx of Polish immigrants that Britain has experienced in recent years. Not only that, but she also made headlines by walking out on her publishers after they gave her books 'chick-lit'-esque covers that didn't reflect how seriously she wanted her stories to be taken. Seriously, this is a fascinating woman.

Courtney has very much continued down the 'ignored injustices' path with *Feral Youth*. This book is a very

gritty portrayal of what life is like for the very poorest people in Britain. Alesha is in a constant battle with authorities that won't listen, systems that don't work, and people who only want to hear their own opinion echoed back at them, rather than trying to change anything. Or, as Alesha herself puts it, "black against white, young against old, fedz [police] against the rest of us". It seemed as though her life was some kind of injustice conga: just when she was past one terrible ordeal, it would be onto the next. Homelessness, childhood abuse, drug abuse, illiteracy, joblessness and - most horrifically - rape all befall her. Yes, you read that right. Sorry to spoil, but there are some things I feel I have a responsibility as a reviewer to mention. It's some of the most emotionally challenging stuff I've ever read - and, I've read Carrie, Ursula Holden's Tin Toys Trilogy (which is god-awful, by the way) and Louisa Reid's Black Heart Blue: I've seen the very worst of humanity through all these books, and this was right up there with them.

To make matters worse, she got precious little help through any of this stuff and was betrayed time and time again - one incident with a journalist will make you want to burn things. It just highlights the gross injustices and despicable double standards that the middle class push onto the poor. I'm not even exaggerating - it made my blood boil so much that there were several moments that I came centimetres away from actually throwing my Kindle out the window in a fit of rage. It just wasn't fair on her - she'd done nothing wrong. Was it any wonder she had rage issues? I was actually cheering her on as she caused thousands of pounds' worth of property damage and stole a load of phones in the Riots - how many other books would have you rooting for a character as they did all this? It was as if she was finally giving back, finally giving the corrupt authorities a taste of their own medicine.

There are three main characters, as far as I'm concerned. Sure, there are lots of minor characters, including a slew ton of other youths from the estate and uncaring adults - or 'horrible pieces of human scum', as they should be called - but the focus is on Alesha, her best friend JJ and her sympathetic teacher Miss Merfield. Alesha, as I've already mentioned, is a very realistic character. Hardened by years of troubles, but not entirely immune to pain. She is full of anger at the way black people and poor people are treated, which is highly understandable, but she also comes across as a little defeatist. She's very quick to give up, or to write herself off, or not to accept help when it's given straight to her. She definitely succeeds in giving a voice to the voiceless - giving a marginalised group of people their moment to complain about the injustices heaped upon them - but she's not totally sympathetic. In her story as in real life, there are no easy or right answers. JJ is Alesha's only friend, but he's very quick to betray her when 'better' people come along. He does come to his senses, but in a gut-wrenching twist he's horrifically punished for it, giving a bleak ending to what looked like was going to be a happy one. Then you've got Miss Merfield - the only adult with a modicum of empathy in the whole story. She genuinely feels for Alesha and, while she does have a tendency to misunderstand the severity of Alesha's circumstances, she does everything in her power to help her. She encourages her in her talent for the piano, gets her job interviews and places to live, writes her CV, even outright gives her money. Above all, though, she emphasises the importance of a positive mental attitude. She realises that self-belief is half the battle, and attempts to show Alesha that she's better than she thinks. Which, of course, she is. In fact, it will transpire by the end that Miss Merfield and Alesha are more alike than either of them think.

Overall, the message I got from this book was one of understanding. Understanding between races, social classes and genders is essential to preventing anything like the Riots from ever happening again. Courtney - I applaud you for writing the book that desperately needed to be written.

Viviane Crystal says

Alesha is the classic “feral youth,” and this is her heartbreaking story. Illiterate, unwanted by her parents, kicked out of every school she attempted to attend, and feeling totally unloved except for her best friend, J.J. who only shows love and care to his elderly grandmother, “Nan.”

Alesha truly believes she has no options. There’s a whole body of language that’s the Jamaican patois lingo of the gangs in the south end of London and the author supplies a glossary of meaning to those who haven’t a clue what life is like for these youths. Most will never survive their young adult years; the others will wind up in jail. Their world is one of “survival of the fittest, but Alesha wonders in other words what exactly she’s fit for?

This young, 15 year-old girl, earns her money by stealing clothes, delivering dope, cowering in fear to the leaders of gangs who are also at war with each other. Several times Alesha is the victim of violence, especially when she fails to pay up after one of her drug deliveries goes bad or when she fails to acknowledge that she is owned in reality by those bigger in the criminal hierarchy of the Peckham Crew. Her closeness to J.J. and earning “p’s” (money) is her whole world and that world is about to undergo a violent transformation.

Early on in the story Alesha meets a middle-aged woman and piano teacher, Miss Merfield, who tries to show Alesha she does have options. Depending on one’s point of view, one might feel deeply for Alesha’s attempts to change her life’s direction or one might perhaps feel quite irritated with her caustic responses in multiple scenes. For her lack of self-respect yields consequences in which she consciously or unconsciously sabotages her own chances for beginning a different lifestyle with reputable employment and education. Others outside of her gang world certainly haven’t an ounce of sympathy for gang members like Alesha and a sense of empathy is as close as another planet. For few of us can even imagine this poignant, tragic lifestyle endured on a daily basis!

One doesn’t enjoy this story but must acknowledge that it’s a necessary one that needs to be told. For this astute author deeply believes that the public needs to acquire awareness of just how imprisoned these feral youths are in their own insecurities, fears, and the veneer of toughness. One realizes how Alesha’s nasty attitude evolves from rejection to deep-seated anger that breaks out after any innocent or flagrant trigger appears. One senses how sharing her story turns into a gross betrayal beyond words toward the end of the novel and another event will practically shatter her forever. No, it’s not far-fetched; it’s so very real, shocking!

This novel was based on the actual 2011 Blackberry London riots. Polly Courtney, kudos to you for taking on such a huge task of delineating the world of the disenfranchised, of those with no hope and no future. Whether they succeed or fail, the Miss Merfields of this world deserve even more acclaim for attempting to bring hope to youth who have no basis of believing in anything beyond their criminal and hard-hearted environment! Words are inadequate to convey the impact of this story that deserves world-wide attention – for it isn’t only England’s problem – it’s ours, wherever we live! Highly recommended.

Carly says

Polly Courtney's Feral Youth dives headlong into the life of Alesha, a 15 year old girl from South London just trying to rep her endz and keep all the right affiliations with Peckham Crew. From the start, it is made clear that Alesha is a hard edged fighter of a youth, shaped and roughened by circumstance and necessity. An absent father and a mother that's negligent at best paint a vague background of Alesha's past, engraining an idea that without true family, street fam is all she has. That's where JJ comes in - best friend, brother figure,

and the closest thing Alesha has to a real family. It is her connections with JJ that drive most of her wishes and decisions as she struggles her way through street life, bouncing from dodgy flats to hostels robbing, shoplifting and running errands for the Crew to make ends meet.

At its heart Feral Youth is a coming of age story which documents the struggles of an inner city youth pushed around from place to place, and her journey to gain confidence in her self and the ability to change the outcome of her life. Bouncing between legitimizing her life with the help of her once piano teacher Miss Merfield and giving in to the ease of money making through drug deals, black market sails, and general thievery, the reader watches Alesha flip flop her way through the novel, unable to gain the drive to pull herself out of her current lifestyle - one she is smart enough to be scared of, but not strong enough to want to leave. It's familiar, it's immediately gratifying, and she's GOOD at it.

Courtney engulfs the reader in the world of Alesha, and gang affiliated life, painting the scene through Alesha's own thoughts and eyes - her very specific catalogue of diction and slang terms reinforcing the believability of her circumstance. We are inside her mind, and feel what she does which often times is the only way the reader would be able to understand the thought process or presumed logic of situations.

While the novel does well to depict the life of a disadvantaged young girl, and further contrast it to the (assumed) privilege born into others, there is an oversimplification which pervades the story. Alesha is motivated by survival - and on occasion, a need to ensure other's (JJ's) survival. Survival in itself is not a simple motivator, and yet the novel fixates on the living from day to day so much that greater motivations, intents, and emotions fall short. As a reader you care about Alesha because you feel SORRY for her, and pity is not exactly the primary emotion you want a reader to feel for your character. Of course, there are situations and plots that need sympathy, but I wanted to properly connect with Alesha, understand her, and instead I found myself unsure when she would throw a tantrum and walk out on benefactor Miss Merfield and when she would have one of her 'the mother I never had' moments. While mood swings and angst are natural for a 15 year old girl, too much became for story convenience, and the continual back and forth bordered on the repetitive rather than enhancing Alesha's lack of self confidence. Similarly, the revelation which finally converts Alesha after various false starts, failed attempts and cases of giving up, is a simple reveal of a character who is successful, or at least appears to be, living in a posh world with nice clothes, despite having originally come from an estate. While this is a legitimate device to spur a character change in Alesha, the scene falls a bit flat after the months of pep talks, examples and support Alesha has been given to pull out of Crew life. I was frustrated by her because she did not seem to WANT to help herself for much of the novel - it is one thing to try and fail and get discouraged, but without full insight into her emotional side, these instances of failure felt less like tragic crippling self doubt, and more like a child too lazy to put in any hard work. I wanted to KNOW Alesha, what makes her tick, and was only offered brief glimpses of this in piano keys and her connection with JJ. Both could have been explored with more detail as they were reoccurring, though often unexplored themes throughout.

The emphasis on the riot itself, provided a window into youth and gang culture in a way which began to explore pack mentality, the contagion of rage and a need for action, the BBM messages highlighting the rapidity with which a collective can form, swell, and above all unite against a common theme. The tables were turned in order to show the deep rooted frustrations of a culture and society constantly put down and suppressed by ruling powers and the inevitable explosion that follows. Here the reader began to see more of Alesha - smashing in windows releasing pent up rage at all the people and things that have pushed her down. It is the depiction of those who destroy things out of envy - destruction of what the cannot have - and it is a powerful concept. But the truth remains that crime was crime - it was not food stolen for survival, but cell phones and technologies. While we feel for the caged bird, it can be hard from a reader's perspective not to also call for justice.

This then is the dichotomy which encompassed my view of the novel. While I emphasized with the hardships of Alesha's life, I wanted more from her in terms of motivation. While I applauded Miss Merfield's benevolence, I chastised Alesha for her laziness. She had moments of gratitude, of pride, of will, yet I struggled throughout to support someone so blatantly turning to crime and drug trafficking. There may have been necessity there, but battling on through adversity is admirable - giving up is allowable - but lacking the ability to try - the DESIRE to, is frustrating.

Overall, Courtney does well to create a window into Alesha's world - the world of South, of streets, of Crew and or poverty, but I want more than a window; I want to step into that world and get lost there.

Tony says

Feral Youth is the tale of Alesha, an angry, disenfranchised 15-year-old girl growing up amongst the desperate poverty and Yardie gang culture of a South London council housing estate in the run-up to the 2011 riots that took place across the UK. Told in the Jamaican patois-tinged vernacular of black South London youth (apparently -- I haven't lived in London since 1999, so I'll have to take Polly's word for it!), it's a bit like the illegitimate offspring of Monica Ali's Brick Lane and HBO's The Wire.

It's an engaging, fast-paced tale, full of thought-provoking insights into how the increasing failure of the welfare state in the age of austerity directly harms the least privileged members of society, often resulting in an inexorable, inevitable slide into illegal activities such as drugs and gang violence -- not as a lifestyle choice, as the media would often have us believe, but as the only practical option for survival for the disenfranchised and abandoned.

It also provides a much-needed examination of the complex inter-related triggers for the 2011 riots that took place across the U.K., glibly and unhelpfully packaged by the media at the time as opportunistic looting and lawlessness, but in fact the release of intolerable pent-up pressures caused by social and racial inequality.

I gave Feral Youth 4 stars rather than 5 because I had a couple of minor reservations: Firstly, I wasn't always 100% convinced by the authenticity of Alesha's narrative voice -- although this could also be because I saw a picture of the author before reading the book! Secondly, Polly's decision to name the head of the Peckham Crew Tremaine Bell meant that I couldn't avoid mentally associating the character with Stringer Bell (played by Idris Elba) from The Wire. And thirdly, the book reads a little bit like a movie script -- so I wasn't at all surprised to discover that it is, indeed, being made into a movie.

But ultimately these are minor quibbles -- on the whole, I found Feral Youth both highly enjoyable and very thought-provoking. It should be required reading for David Cameron and the rest of Britain's ruling elite -- perhaps then they might get a clue about the crushing, desperate poverty their policies of austerity are inflicting on the most vulnerable sectors of society.

J.F. Penn says

I woke up this morning thinking about Alesha, which tells you something about how Feral Youth left its mark. I live in Clapham, down the road from where rioting took place, and yet, the book could be set in a different world. Courtney manages to arouse empathy for the desperate young people involved, anger at the

injustice they suffer and hope that some might be able to escape the circle of gangs and dependency.

Courtney has tremendous insight into this world based on her research with young people and social workers. The book is written in South London slang, in Alesha's first person voice, which makes it powerful to read. I had to start off by checking the useful glossary but after a few chapters, my brain adjusted and I was able to sink into the story, hearing the sounds in my head. It's worth watching the book trailer on YouTube to get a sense of the accent.

One line stood out for me - we wear hoods not to be intimidating to others, but to hide our identity. When you're marked by gangs, you need to be hidden. If you care about understanding this darker side of British life, then this book is a must-read.

Carolyn Stevens Shank says

FERAL YOUTH, a novel by Polly Courtney, is the story of urban youth, who have been socially marginalized by such circumstances as racial bias, parental neglect, failing schools, early pregnancies, economical disadvantages, social isolation, their own poor choices and idleness. They are largely confined to crowded, run-down areas, where government housing, addiction, drugs, and criminality prevails. Some are homeless.

Feral Youth is a disturbing depiction of a prevailing “us against them” mentality among such young people. It is a saga of anger, rage, revenge, violence, drug-dealing, gangs, thievery, impotency, and destructive behavior. Told by an illiterate 15-year old black girl, an 11th grade drop-out, who barely speaks the English language, Feral Youth is a damning reminder of our public failure to address the social problems of today's culture: problems associated with the break-down of the family unit, the war on religion, the cultural glamorizing of the “gangsta” in music, and the hate mongers who profit from it all by keeping racial tensions stirred.

But surprisingly, the novel is also a love story, reminiscent of that familiarized by ROMEO AND JULIET or WEST SIDE STORY. Despite all the criminality and violence we find so distressing, it is, in the end, a story of the redemptive power of love and sanity.

Driven by the resentment that comes of being “disrespected” and the anger fueled by the apathy of society toward the problems they face in their dog-eat-dog world, Alesha, 15, and J.J., two childhood playmates, struggle together to survive on the mean streets of London's South side. Both have been shunted in and out of care centers and foster homes, the children of broken homes. Neither has had any parental supervision. They live together in a flat with Nan, an older relative of J.J.'s, who is suffering from dementia. They care for her, but it is illegal for them to live there, and they are living off Nan's government benefits. This enables them to survive, since they are both young teens and have no jobs. Social Services has removed Alesha from the home of her mother, an alcoholic. Her mother's addiction has both forced and enabled Alesha to become a thief. J.J. has already spent time in the Youth Offenders Program.

The two are best friends. They look out for one another. Both are affiliated with a gang (the Peckham Crew,) which they believe gives them security on the street. But when Nan is deemed to be incompetent to live alone by the Social Services, and she is confined to a nursing home, Alesha and J.J. find themselves homeless and broke. With no resources, they turn to the gang for support and become more and more enmeshed in illegal behavior. The pressures increase when Alesha is permanently expelled from school, and being obligated to the gang, begins work as a drug deliverer. J.J. increasingly begins to identify with Tremaine Bell, the head of the Peckhams and the largest drug dealer in the area. Bell is a vicious, nasty influence who has just gotten out of prison.

Throughout the book, Alesha's main concern is for J.J., whom she regards as her only “fam.” J.J. watches

over Alesha, gives her his money to help with her debts. He realizes that her sex makes her more vulnerable in this macho world. Their story is one of increasing desperation in their separate struggles to stay afloat. She feels she is losing him to the gang; he sees her being influenced by Miss Merfield, a former piano teacher, who is attempting to rescue Alesha.

The prolific use of slang terms, many of which I was not familiar with, made *Feral Youth* difficult for me to get into. Only toward the end, did I begin to accept and feel empathy toward Alesha and J.J. Their language and behavior made them as alien and distant to me, as I would, in reality, probably seem to them. But Miss Courtney has done a very fine job of making me a believer. Her characters are finely drawn and motivated. It is not a perfect book. The plot seems somewhat contrived: (Miss Merfield conveniently shows up at the right moments.) The love story is one for the ages. Still, the ability to insinuate oneself into a world as disordered and violent as this is a feat of daring. This book is significant: it focuses on a problem that has not been largely acknowledged or addressed by the public: the dissolution of social norms.
