



## **The Mare**

*Mary Gaitskill*

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**The story of a Dominican girl, the white woman who introduces her to riding, and the horse who changes everything for her**

Velveteen Vargas is eleven years old, a Fresh Air Fund kid from Brooklyn. Her host family is a couple in upstate New York: Ginger, a failed artist on the fringe of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Paul, an academic who wonders what it will mean to “make a difference” in such a contrived situation. *The Mare* illuminates the couple’s changing relationship with Velvet over the course of several years, as well as Velvet’s powerful encounter with the horses at the stable down the road, as Gaitskill weaves together Velvet’s vital inner-city community and the privileged country world of Ginger and Paul.

## The Mare Details

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Author : Mary Gaitskill

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## From Reader Review The Mare for online ebook

### Diane S ? says

Quite a few years back there was a show on Sunday evenings called Family Classics, I remember being a young girl and watching one show about a girl who fell in love with a wild horse she named Snowfire. This began an obsession with horses that lasted many years. That is what first drew me to this book, a horse making a big difference in a girls life.

This book proved to be so much more than that. Some books grab you from the beginning, others like this one creep up on you slowly. A young eleven year old girl whose mother came to the states from the Dominican Republic, living in a less than desirable neighborhood, is offered a unique opportunity. Through a program called Fresh Air, eleven yr. Old Velvet is able to spend two weeks of the summer with a family in the country. This will bring her to Ginger, a childless woman with a troubled past, and a not very solid marriage. A white woman who falls for a black child.

So I wondered where this was going, how it would work out. It is narrated by Velvet and Ginger, occasionally with thoughts by Heather's husband and Velvet's mother, in alternating chapters. At first I wasn't sure I was getting to know the characters well enough, but by books end I did. I ended up really enjoying this, although I didn't agree with everyone's actions, these were very realistic characters, flaws and all. Despite outward colors, inside many thoughts were the same, insecurity, wanting love, forgiveness, understanding and a sense of accomplishment. Oh and yes, much about horses, riding and a very wonderful friendship between a girl and a horse.

ARC from publisher.

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### Margitte says

A mare and a young girl. Two battered souls who found each other and together they conquered the world.

At first I thought I'm dropping this book as soon as some sentimental emotional manipulation of the reader shows its annoying face. I wasn't in the mood for something like "Lassy Comes Home" in horsy-language. I was in the mood for a cozy, nice, relaxing read. But no frills no fuzz, please.

What a wake-up call ...! Alas, I turned out to be so deeply involved in the story of the disadvantaged 11-year-old Dominican girl from Crown Heights / Brooklyn who received an opportunity, through the Fresh Air Fund to visit a couple in upstate New York for two weeks.

A field filled with unattended emotional landmines lay waiting for Velvet, her single mother, Silvia, her brother Danté, and the couple Paul and Ginger. Somewhere in the middle, their worlds collided: the inner-city harshness against the gentle bucolic calmness. Ginger's need for children drove her to compete with Silvia for Velvet's attention and soul. Abusive Silvia could not compete with Ginger's gentle onslaught. Between these two women a young girl tried to find her way in both worlds. Velvet fell in love with Ginger's world, but knew she did not belong there; she despised the world she was coming from, but could not escape it. The complexities in all the characters made the journey through a field of deadly social- and emotional traps much more challenging.

The two weeks ended up being several years in which Velvet became a young woman. As far as she proceeded within both worlds, different landmines exploded: racism, prejudice, jealousy, ignorance, competition, language barriers, gangsterism, cultural differences, abuse, the list goes on and on. Nobody could be trusted in any of Velvet's two worlds. All the people involved were deeply flawed human beings with limited coping skills (which makes this story so much more endearing).

Even Fugly Girl, a quarter horse thoroughbred mix, had her own backstory, preventing her from trusting humans. But the moment she met Velvet, her story began a new chapter. For both young girl and horse, a new dawn broke. A magic recognition of each other's hurt and insecurities took place with no words in human language needed.

This is a tough read. The story is as much character- as plot driven. Four protagonists carry this deeply, compassionate, moving tale towards the sober, but dignified ending. A monumental climax to a tumultuous journey. No winners, no losers, apart from Velveteen and Fugly Girl. Only reality got the chance to push the reset button in the end.

**ABSOLUTELY RECOMMENDED!!!**

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### **Zoe says**

I admit that I was initially skeptical about this book, which I received as a galley from the publisher in June at the American Library Association conference. I saw the horse on the cover, then skimmed the blurb on the back and mentally sighed, “Oh. A horse book.” But, of course, this is Mary Gaitskill, so this is not a horse book; it is a book about women and their desires. Yes, it is a damaged, unpredictable horse named Fiery Girl that saves Velveteen Vargas from herself, but Velvet’s story is about much more than her mare. Told through alternating perspectives, we see Velvet’s delicate transition from child to teenager unfold through the eyes of Ginger, a recovering alcoholic and painter who becomes Velvet’s godmother, Ginger’s husband, Paul, who is critical of Ginger for getting so close to Velvet, and Silvia, Velvet’s mother who lashes out with her tongue and hands and shoes and belt. I think the change in perspectives was an excellent choice and it keeps the narrative zipping along breathlessly for hundreds of pages.

I expect that Gaitskill will be criticized for writing in the voice of a Dominican girl when she is white, but I appreciate that she regularly exposed white people as assholes in this book (including the high strung horse girls who turn up their noses at Velvet). At the beginning of the novel when Velvet is waiting for the bus to take her to Ginger’s house for the first time, she overhears white women congratulating themselves for making a difference—and Velvet knows they’re talking shit. After years of caring for Velvet who still struggles in school and at home, Ginger concludes, “So Paul was right. Everybody was right. I’m a racist. At least now I know.” I look forward to more conversations regarding how Gaitskill handled race/class differences in this story.

If the plot doesn’t grab you, then appreciate this book for its unrelentingly beautiful imagery and prose. When Velvet meets Ginger, Velvet says, “She was smiling but something else in her face was crying.” Ginger notices Velvet’s sadness, too. Ginger says, “[Velvet] did everything with enchanted hunger, like maybe she was too old for this but wanted it anyway, because she knew it was something she should’ve had.” Ginger and Velvet are separated by age, geography, class, and race, but they find in one another a mutual craving for family, acceptance, and power over their own lives. I greatly enjoyed this book and would recommend it to all survivors of teenage girlhood.

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## **Dorie - Traveling Sister :) says**

\*\*\*\* Note this book was reviewed a few years back but as talk of Fall and school starting I wanted to highlight this book which is an excellent young adult book which would be suitable for grades 6 and up, highly recommend this book!\*\*\*\*

This is one of the most powerful books that I've read in a very long time. Yes, it's a story about a girl and a horse but that is just the tip of what is going on here. I hadn't read Mary Gaitskill before so I was absolutely amazed at her writing. Her prose was succinct and yet fluid, I'm having trouble describing it because it was very unique. Her characters are so very believable because they are flawed and have many things that they are dealing with besides the interactions with Velvet.

The story is told from four perspectives. Velvet is an 11 year old from Crown Heights, New York, what I would refer to as the inner city, really dangerous part of town. She is a very intelligent but very abused. Her mother Sylvia doesn't speak English and she verbally and physically abuses Velvet for even the smallest infraction. Velvet is also a good student but is afraid to call attention to herself and so she doesn't turn in homework, etc. There are gangs of girls that she knows are dangerous and she tries to steer clear of them. Sylvia is a very tortured woman. She herself was abused and immediately fell into abusive relationships with men. She uses Velvet as a scapegoat while she showers her younger son with affection. Ginger is a white married woman, an artist and recovering alcoholic who lives in the country with her husband Paul. Paul is a teacher and seems to love Ginger but has trouble accepting the role that Ginger wants to play in Velvet's life. He is sometimes seen as supportive and at other times he just wants to escape.

Velvet applies and is accepted into a program called Fresh Air where kids like Velvet, poor, living in bad situations, can go to live with couples who live in the country for two weeks so that they can get a chance to see another way of life. This is not really about money, as it is about a different way of dealing with ones emotions and frustrations. You can use talking and problem solving to sort out difficulties that you are dealing with. You can treat other people the way that you would want to be treated.

I feel as though I'm rambling on. The beauty of this story is that we get to see Velvet grow from a child to a young woman and how her interaction and love for horses makes a tremendous difference in her life. She sets goals and she strives to reach them. Ms. Gaitskill is an artist when it comes to projecting internal dialogue, a very difficult thing to accomplish and make it ring true. Velvet's connection to the horses changes her in so many ways, she connects to them on a higher level, she feels that she can hear them talking to her and she talks back, verbally and through her body language.

I loved this passage, one towards the end of the book: "Still, I went to the barn. And that's when it happened: I heard the horses talking to me like the first time I came. I don't know if I made it up because of being so sad, but it didn't matter – it made me feel better. "Hello, girl! We know you! Come see me! Have you got something for me? What's the matter?" These are the things that she heard. "But Fiery Girl didn't say anything, she didn't have to. She just looked at me like she saw me to the bottom, and all her muscles were proud and ready. Like a Jesus heart with fire and thorns inside it." "And I knew I am doing it for this. If somebody asked me what this was, I wouldn't be able to tell them. But I knew, I knew."

This is one of the best books that I've read this year. Read it, you'll see what I mean.

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## Carole (Carole's Random Life in Books) says

This review can also be found at Carole's Random Life

I didn't really know much about this story before I decided to give it a try. I think I really wanted to get lost in a story that was focused on a horse. I did end up getting completely pulled into this story but I quickly found out that this story really isn't about a horse. Sure, there is a horse in the story but this is really a story about a group of people tied to one another just trying to get through life. This book was very different than I thought it would be but it ended up taking me on a fantastic journey.

This story is told from four different points of view. For Velvet, this book really is a coming of age story. Velvet starts the story as an eleven-year-old Dominican girl from a poor family. She goes to stay with a family for a couple of weeks in the summer as part of the Fresh Air fund. Ginger also learns a lot about herself during the course of the story. She is a recovering alcoholic who has never had children but decides to be a host family for the program. Paul goes through a lot of changes during the story. He is a professor and sometimes is a little more hesitant to be so involved with Velvet so much as compared to his wife. The fourth point of view comes from Velvet's mother who is a single mother trying to support her two children alone in a country where she is not able to speak the language. Velvet's mom is difficult to like but by the end of the story I felt that I understood her even if I didn't agree with how she chose to do things.

This book is beautiful in many ways and heartbreaking in others. I found at the beginning of the story that I really liked the parts of the book told by Velvet. I wanted to hear her thoughts about riding horses and her attraction to that one special horse, Fiery girl. As I learned more about Velvet's life at home in the city, I found myself wanting to cheer her on and encourage her. Ginger took a while to grow on me but the more that I understood her the more I found myself able to understand why she was so determined to be a part of Velvet's life. She really did care about the girl and the connection between them felt very real to me. I loved the horses in the story and all of the people at the stable. Velvet's connection to the animals and the pride she had in riding them was beautifully written.

The four narrators of the audiobook did an amazing job. Each voice was very distinctive and really brought the characters to life. If I had been reading a paper copy of this book, these four voices would have been exactly as I would have imagined the characters to sound. The emotions of each of the characters really came through in the narration. Velvet and her mother both were very animated and their feelings were usually on the surface. Ginger and Paul were more guarded and the narrators did a wonderful job of expressing that aspect of their personality. I think that the four narrators really worked well when everything came together in the book. I really think that they all did an equally wonderful job and liked all of their styles. I never had a favorite of the group or one I didn't want to hear. I actually think that the alternating narrators really helped the different viewpoints work well in this audiobook.

I really enjoyed this story. All of the things that Velvet, her mother, Ginger, and Paul go through during the span of the story really kept my interest level high. I never felt like the story lagged at any point. The pacing was well done with parts of the book devoted to character development and others sections that moved the plot forward. There were more than a few parts of the book that made me cringe but I think that those parts really helped make the story feel more realistic. This is a book that really gets its strength from its characters. The characters in the book are all very flawed and seem very lifelike to me.

I would highly recommend this audiobook to others. I think that I got more out of the story by going the audio route because the narrators really did a superb job. This is the first book by Mary Gaitskill that I have read and I plan to look for her works in the future.

*I received a review copy of this book from Blackstone Audio via Audiobook Jukebox for the purpose of providing an honest review.*

### **Initial Thoughts**

I liked this one a lot. The story was very involved with a lot of layers. The characters were all very flawed and realistic. This book was narrated by 4 individuals and the narration was superbly done. Each of the narrators really helped bring the books characters to life and tell the story.

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### **Eve says**

**"The Browns...loved each other, deeply, from the back of the soul, with intolerance in daily life."—National Velvet**

A Booktuber I used to follow initially put this book on my radar when he rated this the best book of 2015, and surprised most of his viewers because they didn't think a story about a girl and her horse would hold his attention. He is usually drawn to gritty, dark and desperate first rate novels. That should have been an indicator that this wasn't going to be a sunny, modern adaptation of *National Velvet*, like I'd imagined, or even a wonderful character study like my favorite modern horse story, *The Horse Whisperer*.

Gaitskill's novel is sordid, violent and riddled with abusive language and graphic scenes of urban life. I think it's best you know that up front...so you're prepared. The two main characters are Velvet Vargas, an eleven-year-old Dominican-American girl from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Ginger, a sort of patron whom she meets through a summer program for disadvantaged minority children from New York inner cities. The two immediately bond, and discover that Velvet has a way with horses, even befriending a wild, abused mare called "Fugly Girl." Over time, the relationship between the three becomes closer and more complicated, especially because of Velvet's abusive mother, and her everyday life among bullies and gang violence when not visiting Ginger in upstate New York.

I really wanted to discontinue reading this about a third of the way in because it made me very uncomfortable. I'm not a person who shies away from complicated literature, but I hoped that this would be going somewhere. I have to add that I am also okay with character studies and plot exempt books too. This didn't do it for me. When I finally got to the end I was so underwhelmed and disappointed! (view spoiler). The characters always fell a tad bit flat, I never knew what their motivation was exactly, and it seemed like the train was picking up momentum only to lose steam a couple of "short" chapters later. The final part of the book felt very hurried, and that is the biggest way to irritate a reader who has already invested many hours in it. Upon listening to the final sentence, I jumped onto Audible's website and returned the audiobook, something I rarely do. At times like this, call it an endorsement if you will, I appreciate their listener guarantee. No questions asked! The only endearing quality about the book was its extensive prose on horses. That was great stuff!

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## Douglas Wickard says

### MY FAVORITE BOOK OF 2015!

It takes all kinds of readers! I, for one, like my books honest, raw, and full of grit. While others prefer something entirely different. Diversity. The name of the game! So, I came upon *The Mare*, Mary Gaitskill's newest outing with some hesitation. As an author, I READ reviews. And, in this particular case, I ALMOST didn't download the book because the reviews weren't stellar. Instead, what I gathered from the chorus of combined voices was...anger and prejudice and a lack of character research. Hmm... I am so glad I didn't listen to those reviewers. I LOVED THIS BOOK! I read it shaking my head at the amount of times my eyes teared up from the honesty written in these pages. The emotionally handicapped world we share with each other and the fate of our youth trying to make sense on a planet where adults are still trying to figure themselves out. I read this book with a new respect for the written word, for this author's bravery in putting something out there so real and bold and courageous, not flowered up the narrative for show like so many precious books that hit the literary scene and go on to win major awards. I was actually in a restaurant when I read the last several pages of this novel and I had to stop reading at the end of each chapter just to gather myself. Tears came without warning. Something was affecting my heart, my soul, NOT my head. The characters had struck a chord and I gladly transported myself right along with them. Ah, now that is true and exquisite writing!

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## Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Velveteen (Velvet) Vargas is an eleven-year-old Dominican girl from the inner city whose family signs up for the Fresh Air Fund, a program that pairs kids from Brooklyn with a host family in upstate New York. Velvet is paired with an Anglo woman named Ginger and her husband Paul. They take Ginger to their rural home, located down the road from a small-town stable, where Velvet discovers the joy of riding. While she develops a close bond with an abused horse named Fugly Girl, Velvet begins to feel torn between her biological family and her host family.

*The Mare* is a tale of different classes and races coming together; sometimes clashing, other times finding common ground. While exploring racial piety, white guilt, and the tumults of a girl coming of age, this book reads like a slice of life. It spans the length of a few years, and its characters are as flawed and complex as real people, making them easy to relate to or identify with.

While most of the characters have strong narrative voices, Velvet's voice belies her age. She is eleven years old when she first appears in the book, but she speaks like a foul-mouthed adult. One could argue that her crude language and lack of decorum is representative of her abusive, impoverished home life; either way, it's easy to forget she's a child.

*If it was anybody else I would've said, Fuck you. You think you can use me like that? But she was Strawberry. So I said, "Okay."*

*When I got Velvet on the phone, she said, "She acts so nice in front of everybody else! I am so sick of her bullshit!"*

Fugly Girl - a quarter horse thoroughbred mix - makes for an endearing character with her tragic backstory. She and Velvet have a lot in common, and the moments they share together make for some of the most emotive writing in the book.

*There was a gold-brown horse kicking, and biting the hell out of her cage. Her eyes were rolling in her head and you could see the white around them. [ . . . ] There were no ribbons or toys or even a name on her cage, just a sign that read "Do Not Touch." I came close to her and she looked at me. That's when I saw the scars on her face, straight, deep scars around her nose and eyes.*

*So I held the saddle and swung my leg and then I was on top of [Fugly Girl]. And then I felt her. I felt her say things, deep things; mostly I felt that she was strong, that she didn't have to let me on her, or do anything I told her. But she did and she would*

Perhaps the most interesting character is Ginger, a childless recovering alcoholic with a history of crappy relationships and a failed career as an artist. Ginger projects her needs onto Velvet, and the contrived circumstances of their union calls into question her motives and her level of awareness about the full scope of their relationship. Is Ginger an ignorant racist? A childless neurotic fool? A desperate woman? A nurturing woman? Or a woman who has found, in caring for Velvet - a new form of addiction to replace her old one?

*And still, it was her child, the lovely girl that she doesn't even want, the child I finally loved, who somehow allowed me a way in, who made me feel what everyone else felt; finally I could join, be part of the play - except everybody thought that was wrong too, that somehow I still wasn't doing it right.*

The pacing in *The Mare* remains tepid throughout. Characters are complex but moments of self-realization are few and far between. And the ending lacks a sense of resolution; the conclusion may leave some readers asking, "What was the point?"

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### Ron Charles says

In the twilight of a year rich with books about race in America, Mary Gaitskill has just published a novel about the knee-smashing effects of minority poverty and the corrosive tonic of liberal guilt. "*The Mare*" is not a colossal epic of our era; its vision is precise; its protagonists — all female — are socially invisible. But here, without a drop of condescension, is fiction that pumps blood through the cold facts of inequality in our country.

The whole story germinates in soil fertilized by good intentions. For Velvet, an 11-year-old Dominican girl in Brooklyn, the Fresh Air Fund promises a chance to get away from the city, to swim, to ride a horse. . . .

*To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:*  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

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### Simon says

I don't really know what to say about *The Mare*. I think I was somewhat disappointed in it. Now admittedly I

was wary of it because of the whole horse thing. That was before reading it and giving it a chance. I did give it a chance but while it's definitely readable it just bored me and annoyed me overall. Mainly because of the 'white rich couple take in a poor black girl for a while and bond with her and turn her into horse riding star' cliche, then the perfectly happy married couple who actually are happy cliche and then the fact I felt like it patronised anyone Dominican from whatever walk of life they came from. A well written book, but a slightly tame, easy and lazy one too.

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### **Elizabeth? says**

There was something about this book that didn't sit well with me. I don't know if it was the style in which it is written (which made it feel longer to me); the voice of the characters; or the lack of action.

The premise of the story is Ginger and Paul are a childless couple that take part in the Fresh Air Program which matches inner-city kids with a family in the suburbs. Ginger and Paul get Velveteen Vargas (Velvet): a young girl from DR that has a mother that is spiteful and angry.

The story is told from various perspectives, but tends to focus on Velvet's and Ginger's. Less than half way through this one, I felt the story was plodding along. Nothing was really happening except a lot of brooding and silence. The characters never talk to each other. There are so many topics raised that are never addressed (Ginger's history with AA, Ginger's rediscovery of her ex-boyfriend, the money that Ginger sends to Silvia (Velvet's mother), the relationship between Paul and Ginger ....).

I think the writing here is solid and Gaitskill's voice for her characters feels real (most of the time), but I felt like there wasn't much of a story arc. I kept waiting for something important to happen, for a character to have some sort of revelation, anything that bordered on a climactic change. Even the end is a let down because everyone is in the same place as when the story began and I feel like that is not an honest portrayal of the life of a teenager (which Velvet is by the novel's end).

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### **Jill says**

There are all sorts of things that might have gone wrong with this premise: a coming-of-age Dominican girl named Velveteen who, through the Fresh Air program, connects with a childless and privileged white woman, Ginger, and a horse named Fiery Girl.

The book could have been preachy or sentimental or reductive or too politically correct or overly clichéd, with its focus on rich and poor, black and white, human and animal. It is none of these things. Mary Gaitskill has written a thoroughbred of a novel, peopled with characters that are often combustible, alienated, and out of their depth.

Surely Ms. Gaitskill named her character with the beloved film National Velvet in mind – the story of a young girl who wins a spirited gelding and decides to train the rambunctious horse to win England's Grand National race. But while that Velvet exists in a sort of fairy tale, this Velvet is a child of urban damage and dysfunction.

Told alternately from many perspectives – but mostly from Velvet and Ginger's viewpoint (with a few

chapters narrated by Ginger's husband Paul and Velvet's highly critical, abusive mother), the book is less about the mare and more about the meres – birth mothers and wannabe mothers, and self-mothering. It's about stumbling in one's walk through life and finding inner strength get up and face another day, and defining happiness and success on one's own terms (for Velvet, it's often as simple as a veiled compliment from a complicated mother who badly loves, or a text from a boy who may well be trouble but who has seeds of goodness in him).

And, because it's written by an author who knows her craft, it's a darn good story about a complex teen who – like many teens – is sometimes easy to love and sometimes exasperating to deal with. In sensitively tackling the nature vs. nurture dilemma – can a child who has everything going against her triumph – it raises thoughtful questions. This is not, by any means, a Seabiscuit; we don't always cheer Velvet on, but we do feel for her. It's a moving, ultimately optimistic, story of lives that intersect.

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### **Elyse says**

Audiobook....narrated by Kyla Garcia, Christa Lewis, Sean Pratt, and Nicol Zanzarella  
.....and the physical hardcover  
I loved BOTH the AUDIOBOOK and THE PHYSICAL BOOK!!!

The four Audiobook narrators were each excellent telling Velvet's story. Each voice was so different and distinct- adding zesty seasonings - of moods - emotions - points of view - and atmosphere enriching the novel as it unfolds.

The physical book was great too — allowing a different type of personal intimacy between me ( the reader ) - and the characters a little deeper. I was able to 'stop' in mid sentence and reflect easier than when the audiobook continued to run.

But I really Love BOTH CHOICES!

**THIS IS SUCH A HEARTFELT NOVEL.....**emotional in that everyone starts off so broken. And everyone needs everyone! This is the first book I've read by Mary Gaitskill ....and I look forward to reading more of her books.

What I especially love - besides the storytelling- the complexities explored - was the way the author brings us into each of the characters inner dialogue. We know how they are feeling and thinking -sometimes very different than the way they behave - saying things opposite from what they feel - or reasons for holding back expressing honest thoughts.

Ginger and her husband Paul - in their 40's - live in upstate New York - in the country. They have a tender relationship from having gone through hard times themselves.

Ginger is a shakily recovered alcoholic and not a hugely successful artist. They were considering adopting an older child - wanting to make a difference in a child's life . They had no children of their own. So they become a host family - at first just for a couple of weeks to Velveteen Vargas, an 11 year old Dominican girl.....

a Fresh Air Fund kid from Brooklyn.

Velvet ends up staying longer than two weeks with Ginger and Paul.

A very unsettling relationship with Velvet's biological mother is heartbreakin— yet there are surprises

throughout this story.

Velvet has a special way with horses — she especially connects with an undisciplined- uncontrollable- (abused)- mare called Fugly Girl.

Strong main and supporting characters ....but it's the range of themes this book examines so well that stands out to me from shattered relationships- poverty - bullying - physical, verbal, and sexual abuse - racism - jealousy- competition- mistrust - neglect - disappointments >> capturing ( so realistic) how people hurt....

This novel makes it so clear of why people need each other when they are hurting. Connecting with others and animals who are also hurting — building a bond of closeness together is incredibly healing.

Wonderful book!!!

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### **Maya Lang says**

I stayed up until 4 a.m. reading this novel with the kind of "holy shit" urgency only the best writing can make you feel. I've since recommended it left and right and pressed it into friends' hands with an emphatic, "You HAVE to read this." Don't look up what the novel is about and don't read the summaries. If you do, you'll roll your eyes and think about all the things that could go wrong, all the reasons to be skeptical. Great writers take on what shouldn't work. They overcome our skepticism, and they do it by simply being that good. I can only imagine how many editors heard the elevator pitch for this and said, "Hmm," and nervously cleared their throats. Screw them. I loved this novel's structure, its effortless switching of voice, its uncanny ability to move between characters, and its lovely balance between inner turmoil and plot. I especially love that Mary Gaitskill made good on her real gift, which is the ability to zero in on the complicated (and often violent) dimensions of love. My only quibble was with the end, though I am mercilessly picky when it comes to endings.

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### **S.W. Hubbard says**

This is my last great book of 2015, and boy did it knock my socks off! It's got everything I love: flawed, fascinating characters, complex parent/child relationships, class conflict, great writing. This is a story of an upper middle class couple who decide to take in a Fresh Air Fund kid from Brooklyn for the summer. (Full disclosure: my family did this once and it was the hardest thing we've ever done. I'd never do it again.) In the process, the girl meets an abused horse and becomes an accomplished rider. Sound like the plot to a Lifetime movie? THE MARE overturns every maudlin, cheap sentiment that this story could have produced. Ginger, the white, upstate wife, is needy, confused, and weak. Velvet, the kid, is tough, vulnerable, and manipulative. Her mother, Silvia, is the woman you love to hate: abusive, angry, irrational; hard-working, protective, worldly. As awful as she is, we never doubt that she loves her daughter with a fierceness that just may destroy them both. And the horse! Fugly Girl is a fully developed character in the story who symbolizes the way the humans might be able to overcome their pasts. The author looks like she herself could be Ginger, yet she does an astonishingly great job of capturing, without condescension, the dynamics of Velvet's Crown Heights, Brooklyn neighborhood and her Dominican family. THE MARE is a character-driven novel in which everyone changes and grows, yet there is no fairy-tale ending (although the end is quite exciting and moving). Some may find the very short chapters and frequent point-of-view shifts distracting, but by the time I reached the end, I felt the author couldn't have told the story in any other way. Highly recommended!

