



Halving the Orange

Michael Hetherington

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Isabella is confined for life to the college her medievalist father founded. Now a brilliant and beautiful young woman, she starts to question her vow of confinement and long for freedom.

But, should Isabella risk giving up her comfortable, protected life in the college for the outside world? The dark mystery behind her confinement unravels slowly amidst quirky characters and intellectual hijinks.

Who can Isabella trust? What really happened to her mother? The truth comes at a high price, and in the end Isabella must make a life-altering decision.

Halving the Orange Details

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From Reader Review Halving the Orange for online ebook

Hilda says

I really enjoyed the story, although I thought it was a period piece from the cover. I thought the characters were interesting. Couldn't put it down.

Ashley says

I received a copy of this book through the Goodreads Giveaway program.

This book was definitely not what I expected. When I signed up for the free copy, I originally thought it was some kind of historical fiction, based on the cover and the blurb. It's actually set in the 1990s and really, the word "medievalist" should have made me realize that it was contemporary. So that led to a surprise when I first started the book, but the story itself pulled me in and kept me interested.

There are also issues. The flow is odd at points and the dialogue can seem stilted and unnatural. There's not a very good sense of time in the first half of the book, but it does improve. The author adds detail at random points, but leaves out information and action that would make the story flow better or break up the dialogue a bit.

Ultimately, I had difficulty empathizing with the characters. They make a lot of irrational and impulsive decisions, and while Isabella is suitably stunted for having been confined for her entire life to the grounds of a medievalist and cloistered university, some of the other characters also seem to lack an ability to make a thought-out decision. There were also some little tangents for characters that didn't go anywhere and didn't really contribute to the narrative.

In spite of all of that, though, I did want to see what would happen. I wanted to know when secrets would be outed, what Isabella would decide for in the "life-altering decision" mentioned on the back of the book (view spoiler). The characters are annoying at times, but some of them (especially Isabella) are believable due to their situations. It's difficult for me to put my finger on just why I liked this book, other than: I really like a mystery.

Michelle says

A truly phenomenal story! I need a day or so to process what I have just read, the imagery, the hidden meaning, the moral arch, the truly bizarre cast of characters! A review to follow.

I received my copy of Halving the Orange from the author through the Goodreads First Reads program. Several days after finishing the novel, it still dominated my thoughts. I spent my work day mulling over imagery and repetitive themes. Having spent more years than I care to admit in university seminar groups, picking apart the classics and contemporary fiction alike, I can freely say that this book needs to be on the reading list of every Canadian university English class. I don't believe that the important meat of this novel is in what is written, but rather what is NOT written!

This novel opens with scholarly Malcolm sitting in his regular study carrel when he spies an odd fellow, sitting precariously beneath a guillotine, which he has placed open a library shelf. The peculiar fellow explains that he studies the French Revolution, and carries the guillotine around to inspire empathy, a reminder of the constant threat of life in revolutionary France. This is just too strange for Malcolm, he decides to call it a day and returns a few books to the shelves, setting off a truly bizarre chain of events. Without spoiling plot and details, I will just say that we are introduced to a whole host of truly bizarre, obscure and often ridiculous, sometimes pathetic characters, who each lead truly bizarre, obscure and unfathomable lives. Just how many times should I use the word bizarre to describe this book? Pick up a copy, enjoy the strangeness, then let me know!

We are introduced to Isabelle, Malcolm's friend from his previous school, whom we are led to believe he has feelings for. Isabelle is the central character of the novel, living a cloistered life in the medieval college her father has founded. The situation seems very strange, a presumably teenaged girl who has no desire to visit life outside of the college walls, until one impulsive moment that she decides to invite herself along on a fellow schoolmate's trip back home. Coincidentally (because this book is overflowing with coincidences) she happens to run into Malcolm in this same little British Columbia town. Malcolm just happens to be on the run, and Isabella has the opportunity to casually ask him about the "head slice" that she found in the pot of thyme he sent her as a gift. This is exactly what makes this book so BIZARRE, and addictive at the same time. Explosive, life shattering events are passed off as mundane, glossed over, never truly revisited or dealt with. I found myself screaming at the pages in wonderful frustration. Why are there no ramifications to actions, no punishments, no "come-to-Jesus" revelations? Why do these characters just continue forward, never looking back? Is there no growth, no hindsight, no higher moral ground?

This book is drowning in obscure characters, and even a week after the fact, I am still trying to make sense of them. There is Gregory, the poison-making gardener. Professor Allenbeigh, Isabella's academic fraud of a father, we can add murder and slime-ball seduction to his list of offences. Filbert, my personal favourite, a seemingly mentally deficient gopher/handy-man, who has a secret of his own. Fraser's wack-job mother, his civil servant father, MIA sister each have a connection to Allenbeigh college. Let's not forget the invisible man who holds the plumb line, who may or may not be in attendance. And last, but not least, our fair Isabella, who can not simply walk away from the strange promise she made to her dying mother to always stay at the college and never leave its grounds. She must make a life or death choice, in high dramatic fashion, once again raising the coincidence flag when she opts to die in the same manner as her mother, despite the fact that she had no knowledge of the events surrounding her mother's death.

So why, if this book is so obscure, so frustrating, so fraught with forced speeches, non-responsive responses and a lack of emotion or growth of the characters, did I love it so much? Because it made me think. It made me examine those non-responses, those impulsive actions and nonsensical events (such as the Viril Guys' pushups) and try to find meaning. As I said earlier, what is NOT written in this book is much more profound than what is written. I can not even find a reason why some of the characters existed! What was really up with Filbert, would Allenbeigh ever "get his" in the end? It was a maddening read and I felt that like the characters in the novel, I just had to exist in that moment, no reassessing the past, no clear thought to the future.
