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My Absolute Darling: A Novel



Synopsis

"This is one of the most important books you'll pick up this decade. —*Harper's Bazaar*" The word 'masterpiece' has been cheapened by too many blurbs, but *My Absolute Darling* absolutely is one."

—*Stephen King* "A major American debut... intense, powerfully wrought and memorable, *My Absolute Darling* is an absolutely thrilling literary success and a novel that will stay with me for a very long time. —*The Houston Chronicle* A brilliant and immersive, all-consuming read about one fourteen-year-old girl's heart-stopping fight for her own soul. Turtle Alveston is a survivor. At fourteen, she roams the woods along the northern California coast. The creeks, tide pools, and rocky islands are her haunts and her hiding grounds, and she is known to wander for miles. But while her physical world is expansive, her personal one is small and treacherous: Turtle has grown up isolated since the death of her mother, in the thrall of her tortured and charismatic father, Martin. Her social existence is confined to the middle school (where she fends off the interest of anyone, student or teacher, who might penetrate her shell) and to her life with her father. Then Turtle meets Jacob, a high-school boy who tells jokes, lives in a big clean house, and looks at Turtle as if she is the sunrise. And for the first time, the larger world begins to come into focus: her life with Martin is neither safe nor sustainable. Motivated by her first experience with real friendship and a teenage crush, Turtle starts to imagine escape, using the very survival skills her father devoted himself to teaching her. What follows is a harrowing story of bravery and redemption. With Turtle's escalating acts of physical and emotional courage, the reader watches, heart in throat, as this teenage girl struggles to become her own hero—and in the process, becomes ours as well. Shot through with striking language in a fierce natural setting, *My Absolute Darling* is an urgently told, profoundly moving read that marks the debut of an extraordinary new writer.

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Customer Reviews

My Absolute Darling: A Novel

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An Best Book of September 2017: There's so much to admire in My Absolute Darling: acute emotional insight, precise and evocative writing about the natural world, and pacing worthy of an action movie. How can this possibly be a debut? But some people live up to their names, and Gabriel Tallent, whose first novel this is, writes with bravura more experienced authors can only envy. His story, which feels a little like a girl-power fairy tale come true, starts dark. Fourteen-year old Julia, called Turtle, or sometimes Kibble, lives with her paranoid, survivalist father in the wilds of Mendocino County. Their ruin of a house has boarded-up windows and "spindled wooden railings overgrown with climbing roses and poison oak." If Turtle is that rose, then her father is the poison oak: his touch (and he touches Turtle) leads to trouble. But he's taught his daughter to shoot and forage -- she can "decipher" the woods, even at night -- and those skills serve her well when she finally starts to free herself from his control. One of the delights of this novel is the way Tallent reveals another culture -- another world, really -- coexisting in Mendocino, where middle-aged women practice yoga naked and swear by "the goddess" while their sons joke about hippies reading Finnegans Wake to their peyote plants. These flashes of humor and evidence of the sometimes goofy pleasures of civilization are like beacons lighting the way to a better life for Turtle, if only she can make her way out of the woods. --Sarah Harrison Smith, Book Review

"There are books we like well enough to recommend, but there are a very few •To Kill a Mockingbird, Catch-22, The Things They Carried• that we remember forever. To my own shortlist I can now add My Absolute Darling, by Gabriel Tallent. Fourteen-year-old Turtle Alveston is a brilliantly rendered creation, and her father is the most terrifyingly believable human monster to inhabit the pages of a novel since Harry Powell in The Night of the Hunter. This book is ugly, beautiful, horrifying, and uplifting." •Stephen King• "Every once in awhile there comes along a fictional character...whose plight and determination to overcome subsumes the reader so completely, we actually feel ourselves missing him or her after the final page. Turtle, the adolescent

protagonist of Gabriel Tallent's debut novel, is that and so much more...this is one of the most important books you'll pick up this decade. —Harper's Bazaar —"One of EW's favorite books of the year so far —an unputdownable coming-of-age novel. —Entertainment Weekly —"Difficult to put down —the writing is lush and vivid. You'll read it with your stomach in your shoes, rooting for [Turtle] the whole time. —Marie Claire "The year's must-read novel...Tallent in this debut makes an old story — the drama of coming of age — feel original and full of youthful power." —The Times (London) "The magnificent, inhospitable landscape of northern California is itself a character here —a fast-paced adventure story —[a] strange and remarkable book. —The Guardian —"[An] engrossing read. —InStyle —"Captures a compelling young heroine. —Vanity Fair —"The adolescent heroine of Gabriel Tallent's harrowing novel of abuse will not only break your heart, but leave your mind reeling with her resourcefulness, stamina and humanity. My Absolute Darling is a major American debut that incorporates psychological realism of the highest order, juxtaposed with nature writing that at times is so lyrical, you might as well be reading poetry —Tallent is not just a good storyteller, he is a superlative describer of the natural world. But what sets him apart is his ability to bring to life how that natural world is interpreted, and what that reveals about the characters in his fiction. —The Houston Chronicle —"Gabriel Tallent's debut novel is brilliant and terrifying, told in expansive, wild and bold prose —Reading this book is like watching an electrical storm, both beautiful and dangerous —with fragile tendrils of beauty and hope tenaciously emerging here and there in the gothic web the story weaves. —The Minneapolis Star-Tribune —"Explosive —Gabriel Tallent is a lapidary realist —There are many elements of this story we would rather not believe — all so convincingly rendered that we can't help but believe them. —The Boston Globe —"My Absolute Darling is an absolute triumph. —The National —"Loved every minute. —Newsday —"Ferocious, heart-breaking —Tallent combines gorgeous passages about the wilderness Turtle knows well and a steady beat of dramatic tension in this smashing debut. —BBC —"[A] gripping, vivid debut —Readers will root for Turtle as she sets out to escape and be absorbed by Tallent's stunning descriptions of nature. —RealSimple —"Destined for Hollywood, the action here spills off the page with Tallent's visceral descriptions of violence and the desperation to survive even the most unspeakable misfortune. It's possible that we've never

rooted harder for anyone than we did for the heroic protagonist, Turtle Alveston; nor loathed a book's antagonist quite like her abusive father Martin. The cinematic pace of *My Absolute Darling* will have you physically reacting—clenching, sighing, relaxing, tensing up—as you barrel to the end of this incredibly redemptive, satisfying book.

"Easily one of my favorite debut novels of the past decade." —Michele Filgate, *LitHub*

"To read [*My Absolute Darling*] is to become an evangelist for it." —*The Millions*

Turtle is the strong, resilient heroine we didn't know we needed, and you'll fall head over heels in love with *My Absolute Darling*.

"HelloGiggles" —"You're going to be seeing this one everywhere pretty soon" | a really remarkable tale about a remarkable young woman.

"[Tallent has] written a fearless adventure tale that's as savvy about internal emotional storms as it is about wrangling with family and nature" | A powerful, well-turned story about abuse, its consequences, and what it takes to survive it.

"Few coming-of-age stories deliver the sheer lyrical power of Tallent's debut" | Lucidly written, both heartbreaking and heartfelt, this book is ultimately affirmative without the slightest sentimentality, and it's remarkable.

"Turtle is an extraordinary character whose thoughts and actions enliven the pages of Tallent's remarkable first novel" —remarkable not only for its characterization but also for its minute examination of the natural world that Turtle inhabits. So vivid is the gorgeously realized setting that it becomes itself a major character in a novel that lingers in the mind long after the final page.

"Emotionally fraught" | Turtle's story is harrowingly visceral.

"I read *My Absolute Darling* in one sitting, well past midnight, despite an early-morning flight: the book is that impossible to put down. Gabriel Tallent depicts Turtle's battle for her independence—body, mind, and soul—with brutal honesty and overwhelming tenderness. The result is a heartrending debut that will shock, then shake, then inspire you.

"Celeste Ng, *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Little Fires Everywhere* and *Everything I Never Told You*" —"It is unreal how vivid and compelling this book is. Turtle Alveston is one of the most vibrant characters I've come across in a long time, and every scene in this astonishing novel packs so much tension, so much insight, such beautiful prose and such masterful handling of detail, I simply could not stop reading."

—Phil Klay, National Book Award-winning author of *Redeployment*

I thought *My Absolute Darling* was outstandingly good. It is beautifully written, remarkably insightful and completely gripping. This is the story of 12-year-old Julia "Turtle" Alveson who lives with her survivalist father on the fringes of society in Mendocino, California. She is skilled in guns, survival skills and so on, but at sea with other people and in social situations. Told entirely from Turtle's point of view, we see her struggles with understanding her father's obsessive and abusive behaviour which she (and probably he) believes to be what love is. As events and growing maturity begin to make her more aware, the tension between what she has believed and what she begins to recognise as reality grows and Turtle has to wrestle with where her future lies and how, if at all, she can realise it. This doesn't sound like a great read on the face of it, but it is. I genuinely found it hard to put this book down; the story is gripping, with some passages of incredible tension and real adventure, and Gabriel Tallent takes us right inside that young woman's head with her confusion, self-doubt (often spilling into self-loathing) and resilience in a way which I have seldom experienced. The portraits of her and of her monstrous father are fantastically real, and I found the entire thing completely convincing. Be warned that there are some quite horrifying scenes of child abuse, but they are absolutely justified in the context and excellently judged - a world away from the often offensively facile use of child abuse as a theme in run-of-the-mill thrillers. The prose is excellent. Gabriel Tallent writes in a measured, unmelodramatic but rather lyrical style, which brings the people, especially Turtle, wonderfully to life. Just as a tiny example, we get sentences like this: "She waits there in the grass, feeling her every thought stored up and inarticulate within her," and this sort of brilliant distillation of internal experience shines through the book. The sense of place is excellent and dialogue is completely convincing; I especially liked some wonderful episodes of the jokey, wordy, literate chatter of two High School boys as it contrasted with Turtle's near-silent inarticulacy. I find it hard to express quite how good I thought this book was. It is a rare combination of an utterly gripping story, excellent writing and genuine depth of content. Very, very warmly recommended.

This novel about child physical and sexual abuse is as raw, gritty and hardcore as anything I've ever read. It had me stunned by its power and depth, by its ugliness and truth. The author has a rare understanding of victims, especially how their desire to be loved by the abuser has them returning for more abuse because that is what they know. The abuse is predictable and real as nothing else is. The victim understands the rules - shame, secrecy and silence. Their own self-loathing and love/hatred for the abuser becomes a way of life, a way to turn things inward, a way to make understood that which is not understandable. Fourteen year-old Turtle lives with Martin, her father, in

Mendocino, California. She is adept at shooting targets with any type of fire arm and is prepared for attack by any outside forces. She lives with a survivalist mentality that Martin has structured all around her. Their home is almost bare and Turtle hears the rats chomp on their left-overs at night, at least on those nights when Martin doesn't carry her to his bed. The narrative about sexual abuse is as true and as horrific as any I've read in fiction. "His touch brings her skin to life, and she holds it all within the private theater of her mind." "He believes her body to be something that he understands, and, treacherously, it is." What is often the worst experience for victims is their own body's betrayal as it responds viscerally to the abuser. Turtle hates what her body appears to enjoy. Turtle's life is isolated except for school where she appears to be behind academically. She has no friends and she refuses to see the school counselor. When Martin is called to the principal's office because Turtle's teacher has concerns, he is able to side-step any of their suggestions. It appears that the disastrous conditions of Turtle's existence will continue. However, Martin doesn't plan on Turtle meeting Jacob, forming a close and intimate bond with him, and being exposed to his family and the outside world, a world where people thrive. Turtle has the survival skills of a modern-day Rambo but her belief in herself has been formed by self-hatred. She knows her way around guns and the wilderness and there are times when she thinks about escaping the life she's in. She is torn between having promised Martin that she won't run away and her own desire for a different life. As the physical and sexual abuse mount, Turtle's life is crumbling away. This novel is dark, very dark, and if your stomach is weak, I don't recommend it. However, if you want to discover a wonderful new writer and read a book that doesn't veer from truth, even in its most difficult form, read 'My Absolute Darling' by Gabriel Tallent.

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