

KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

DOWN IN THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

Kelley Kay Bowles
Aionios Books (223 pp.)
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BOOK REVIEW

A teenager learns to cope with her loved ones' problems in this YA novel.

Harper Southwood is in her sophomore year in high school. She has only one friend, Cora Perkins; is in love with a boy she's never spoken to; and feels so different from those around her that she's become convinced she must be a changeling: a troll switched at birth with a human baby. That would account for her twitches and allergic reactions whenever someone nearby is getting sick. It would also explain her curiosity—she's always looking things up—her insecurities, and her inability to connect with her classmates. Harper may not feel normal, but she does have the love and support of her family: her mum and dad and her gay live-in uncle. Teenage life is what it is; Harper knows she'll get through it. But then Cora starts cutting herself and Harper handles it poorly. Before she knows it, Cora lands in the hospital. Then Harper's mum takes ill, and the teen, already out of her depth, is partnered in science class with the boy she loves. The people she relies on most now need *her* support, but can she cope with the serious adult issues suddenly piled on top of her teen problems? Bowles (*In Vision's Shadow*, 2006), who also writes books under the name of Kelley Kaye, clearly understands the world of young adults. Her depiction of Harper—her anxieties and excitability; her inner and outer personas; her heightened sense of the importance of “now”—cannot fail to pull readers into a teen mindset. The story is increasingly dark, yet in the telling it neither wallows nor depresses. Harper is allowed strength in her vulnerability. For all her isolation, it is her empathy that makes her special. There is a message here but not one that is pushed beyond the pale. Bowles writes to engage and to confront yet always seemingly with the intent to uplift. The resulting novel, far from being a leaden treatise on teen suffering, spurns literary pretensions and strives instead to include Harper's generation of young adults and give this group its due. Girls especially will relate, but there is room here for everyone.

A sage, vivacious tale of people set apart and brought together.

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