



Minding Ben

Victoria Brown

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At sixteen, Grace Caton boards her first airplane, leaving behind the tropical papaya and guava trees of her small village in Trinidad for another island, this one with tall buildings, graceful parks, and all the books she can read. At least that's what Grace imagines. But from the moment she touches down, nothing goes as planned. The aunt who had promised to watch over her disappears, and Grace finds herself on her own.

Grace stumbles into the colorful world of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, having been taken in hand, sort of, by a fellow islander, Sylvia. Here, she's surrounded by other immigrants also finding their way in America.

From her Orthodox Jewish landlord, Jacob, to her wannabe Jamaican friend, Kathy, who feels that every outfit can be improved with a Bedazzler and a low-cut top, there's much to learn about her new city.

Most challenging of all is figuring out her new employers, the Bruckners, an upper-middle-class family in Manhattan. The job is strange Grace's duties range from taking daily nude photos of her pregnant boss (a shock to her, since she's never even seen her own mother naked) to dressing in a traditional maid's costume to serve Passover seder. But Grace loves four-year-old Ben, and she's intrigued by the alternately friendly and scheming nannies who spend their days in Union Square Park, and by their constant gossip about who's hired, who's fired, and who, scandalously, married her boss.

As the seasons change, Grace discovers that the Bruckners have surprising secrets of their own, and her life becomes increasingly complicated and confusing. But opportunities appear in the most unexpected places, and Grace realizes that she's living in a city and a world where anything is possible.

Minding Ben Details

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From Reader Review Minding Ben for online ebook

Mary (BookHounds) says

Grace comes to New York as a sixteen year old in search for a better life and ends up as a child care provider to a four year old, Ben. She learns to grow up fast and deal with some strange and new customs like the daily nude photography of her pregnant employer. While most kids this age would decline, Grace realizes that she has limited choices and adapts. She must also deal with playground politics that would stun the most hardened business person. The story follows Grace through her adventures in New York and her falling in love with her four year old charge, Ben.

I liked the story, but parts of it were slow for me. I found it interesting that there is a huge underground network of nannies from the islands south of the United States. The parents are caricatures of a typical New York power couple on their way up where the mother is self serving and the father a bit slimy. It also shined a light on the real point of the story, that these children become accessories and are raised by caregivers who actually care about them, which is more than the parents could ever do. I think the author is writing what she knows and the details show that this really is based on a reality so few of us know. I received this book from the publisher at no charge in exchange for my honest review.

Amanda says

If you have the chance to listen to the audio book definitely do! I am giving the novel 4 stars and adding another for the narration.

Meg says

Great novel about a Trinidadian teenager working as a nanny in 1990's Manhattan. The book is descriptive but unsentimental. The characters are complex and nobody gets reduced to a stereotype. The book clearly portrays how exploitation can happen in domestic work (although I still found it was hard to imagine why Miriam and Sol would think it was okay to treat Grace as they do, we do get glimpses into their mindset through conversations Grace overhears).

Kristin (Kritters Ramblings) says

A good read, but I sit on the fence as to how much I truly liked it. A story about a nanny in Manhattan who is originally from Trinidad and her struggle to find her place. I loved the cast of characters that surrounded Grace, but I am torn as to whether I liked her. I felt at times that her character didn't truly act her age and at times it was unclear as to what age she truly was. Beyond that - the family she worked for became a clear picture in my mind and I found the other nannies that became her friends were unique yet similar.

There is one thing in particular that on a personal level, I didn't enjoy. When the nannies all joined at the park, they would fall into their authentic accents. While I find it interesting, it was hard to read. I may have lost a few things because sometimes I just couldn't get it.

Heather says

When Grace Caton boards a plane heading to New York from Trinidad, she's only sixteen years old. Promised a home with a distant cousin in America, Grace is both excited and scared as she makes her way abroad. But when Grace arrives, she finds that she's been stranded with no one to retrieve her from the airport and nowhere to live. Soon Grace is living with the mercurial Sylvia and her patchwork family. Though Grace isn't exactly freeloading at Sylvia's, her luck in the job department has been pretty meager. As Grace searches for the perfect position, she is also considering marrying Sylvia's brother Bo for a green card. Just when she thinks she'll never get a job, a call comes for her regarding a nanny position. But Miriam, the woman offering the job, wants to hire Grace to be her maid, nanny and helper, all for ridiculously low salary. What is Grace to do with no other options on the horizon? With a sinking heart, she agrees to the job, and her life is never the same. Moving between the circles of Island immigrant nannies, her party-loving friends, and her mish-mash family at Sylvia's, Grace discovers that life in New York isn't as easy as she once imagined it would be, but despite the hardship and disadvantages she faces, she will not turn tail and run back home. At times funny, at times tragic, this is the tale of a young girl left on her own to manage life in the big city, and of the people she meets who will sometimes help and sometimes hinder her.

This was one of those books that was really hard to put down. From the very beginning, I was caught up in Grace's unusual tale. She had a great head on her shoulders and was very responsible, which is really unusual for a sixteen year old girl. Grace is living in an untenable situation at Sylvia's because the family lives a very low income and restricted life. Grace's presence is a godsend for Sylvia, who uses Grace's services in minding her small children in exchange for room and board. But Sylvia is not always the best roommate, and the five residents are living in a two room apartment that may or may not be hazardous for their health. Sylvia can also be demanding and uppity, which is one of the reasons Grace must find herself another situation soon. But her lack of a green card is something that hinders her time and time again.

When Grace finally lands a job with Miriam Bruckner, she knows she's being taken advantage of but has no better option. Miriam is not only overly demanding but can be racist at times, and her inappropriate comments sometimes went over Grace's head. Not so with me. When I read how Miriam would exploit Grace and then treat her with racist contempt, my blood would boil. I felt a little angry with Grace for standing by and taking all this ridiculous abuse, but time and time again, I realized she had no other options available to her. There were also some subtle sexual tension between Miriam's husband and Grace, which did not go unnoticed by Miriam. Grace's only respite from this horrible family was her connection to the other nannies in the building. But even there, there were rivalries and factions that Grace was loathe to get caught up in. There was a lot of internal and external conflict in this book, and it was all very realistic and emotionally charged. In spite of Grace's innocence, there was a lot of messiness to her life and the lives of those around her, and in her struggle for freedom and independence she began to grow both in wisdom and experience.

The third aspect of this book had to do with Grace's ties to her island acquaintances living in New York, and these, I think, were my favorite sections. The interactions between Grace and her friends were sometimes portrayed in heavy patios dialect, and having had a few friends from the small islands many years ago, the patios brought back a lot of memories. Grace's friendship with Kathy, another girl who immigrated from her village to New York, was full of gentle teasing and genuine affection. Often it was Kathy who saw Grace through her toughest times, and the two girls did a lot of leaning on one another over the course of the story. There was even a love component in this story in the form of another islander named Brent. As Grace begins to realize her own worth and to navigate her own struggles, her friends, including an American from her building, become the heart of her support system. I had a very affable reaction to her growing social ties and

their effects as the book wound its way forward.

I really enjoyed Minding Ben for a lot of reasons, primarily because of the interplay between the dramatic tension and the character creation of the story. Brown does an exceptional job imbuing her story with all the elements that a reader will find engrossing and takes the narrative through many believable twists and turns that kept me hungering for more. It was a really diverting read, and certain sections had a deliciously scandalous feel to them. This book would be a perfect beach read, and I can't imagine anyone not falling for the unapologetic and winsome Grace. A very intriguing read, and one that I won't soon forget. Highly recommended.

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

Having read but not especially liked The Nanny Diaries, I wasn't sure I wanted to tackle another novel bashing clients, employees and children alike, and filled with whining. I decided to give this one a try because it is about a young Trinidadian woman, a girl actually, who comes to the United States to make her way in the world.

16-year old Grace has a good family in Trinidad but thinks her new life will be better in the U.S. Her aunt arranges a job with her cousin, living in her home, caring for a child, with time to go to school. Too bad the cousin wasn't on board with the plan. So, of course, things go terribly awry. Grace's unlikely savior is Sylvia, wonderfully 3-dimensional, raising three children in a dangerous dump of an apartment. *With Sylvia, you always knew where you stood. She screamed when she was mad and a minute later, having heaved her anger off, asked if you wanted rice and peas and turkey wings.* Sylvia is not modest. *She was definitely topless. Her huge breasts weighed down like two freshly slaughtered baby seals, dark noses still wet, that had been flung over her shoulders.*

Of course, Grace's eventual employer, Miriam, is not very nice to Grace. Her husband treats her better, for the wrong reasons, but is on the slimy side and won't stand up to his wife. Grace frustrated me because she accepted such bad behavior without a fight, over and over. But then, she was still a teen with no safety net, trying to get by the best she could. Neighbor Dave is wonderful, and provides something of a safe place to fall. And all the other nannies in the neighborhood are good and bad and mostly somewhere in between. I'll never look at rhinestones again without thinking of Kathy and her BeDazzler.

Ben, the little boy in Grace's care, was for the most part, a sweet little guy – no monster children in this story. But the story wasn't as much about being a nanny to Ben as it was a coming-of-age and coming-to-America story.

The story bogged down a bit in places, but then this isn't an action adventure. It was also a little predictable at times. Nevertheless, it is a sweet, entertaining story written by a woman who came to America from Trinidad, on her own at the age of 16, and the truth of her experiences shines through in the story.

I was given an Advance Reading Edition of the book by the publisher. The quotes may not reflect the published edition.

Shari says

Someone described this book as THE HELP meets THE NANNY DIARIES. There is an element of truth to that description. Grace is a 17 year old girl from Trinidad who gets a job as a nanny for a three year old boy. She is paid \$200 a week. In addition to taking care of the child, she must also cook, clean, do laundry, grocery shop and fend off the advances from the husband. Her employers consistently request that she start early and keep her working long after her agreed upon ending time. Since she is an undocumented worker and she is so young, she doesn't feel she has any recourse. A very hard book to read.

Gina says

I enjoyed the story and as is often the case it is between stars in my rating. It kept me engaged and I was convinced by most of the character developments but found a couple to be suspect but I remind myself that people surprise us in real life by their uncharacteristic decisions or actions. Overall I enjoyed the story and would rate it 3.5.

Sunny says

I read a very different type of book this weekend. There are many novels out there that discuss nannies and babysitters. They are generally very funny and the main character usually ends up with a rich man. What makes Minding Ben unique for me and therefore qualifying as shining in the dark is that it brings light to a group of nannies in NYC that I knew nothing about or had read about. There is a very large community of West Indians in NYC and usually when one thinks of immigrants they think of Mexicans but they are just one part, albeit a large part. Minding Ben focused on a young girl named Grace who comes to Brooklyn on her own from Trinidad. She is stranded at the airport and has to fend for herself to survive in a new city. This story tells the tale of a girl coming of age in a world she knows little about and her ability to maintain even through her naivete and the hardships that come her way. If you are expecting a light read, this book is not for you. But if you are expecting a story about immigration struggles, some insight into the West Indian community, and inspiration, give this book a try. A beach read, this is not but this book made me more interested to know about what goes on in Caribbean communities in North America. The author Victoria Brown is from Trinidad and the book reads almost as if it is an autobiography as she was a nanny when she came to New York when she was 16 years old. Although the main character is Trinidadian, there was not much of the dialect in the book which I was kind of hoping for but that lack of dialect did not take away from the book. In fact, the book read very smoothly and it is obvious that it was written by a highly intelligent person. I would recommend this to anyone interested in a more serious side to immigration and nannies.[return][return]<http://shinesinthedark.wordpress.com/...>

Tara Chevestt says

This is a novel about slavery in the 1990s. I'm serious. Slavery. Only it doesn't take place on a southern plantation, however, but in a Manhattan apartment. The slave, the heroine, Grace, is not brought on a slave ship against her will either. She comes via airplane from Trinidad and she willingly enslaves herself. This is what I had a problem with more than anything. I personally, would rather live an uneventful life in a cottage by the sea than enslave myself. Anyways, Grace agrees to work as a "nanny" for this snotty white family for a lousy two hundred bucks a week.

She minds Ben, bathes Ben, feeds Ben, cooks Ben dinner, cooks his parents dinner, irons their shirts, does their laundry, carries their grocery bags, mops their floor, allows them to dock her pay despite the fact she works more hours than she is supposed to and doesn't say a thing, I can go on....

To read full review, please click on the link: <http://wwwbookbabe.blogspot.com/2011/...>

Torey says

I couldn't help feeling this was based on a true story, but some parts were soo out there I want to believe it was fiction.

Young gal arrives in America from Trinidad. And after being abandoned at the airport she begins to make life happen on her own. Sleeping on couches, staying with other refugees, she begins to find a place. I could appreciate the story, even as slow moving as it was. But it was the ending left that Soo much to be desired. Really just drops off.....

Kathleen Payne says

A 16 year old girl from Trinidad, Jamaica comes to America, alone and having to find work to survive. The story is based on a true experience by the author, Victoria Brown, only the main character is Grace. I loved this book, the story telling and the cast of characters. It is somewhat of a cross between "The Help" and "The Nanny Diaries". The wife, Miriam, I would personally strangle or un-friend IF I ever had a person in my life like her!!!!

Rebekah O'Dell says

Sixteen-year-old Grace leaves Trinidad and everything she has ever known for the hope of living the American dream in the Big Apple. Her dreams soon come crashing down around her, though, when her cousin, with whom she is supposed to live, doesn't show up to pick her up at the airport ... ever. Grace eeks out an existence through the Caribbean immigrant community and finds work as a nanny — her only hope of getting legal citizenship. As you might guess, Miriam and Sol, Grace's employers, are less-than-perfect and less-than-accomodating. Though Grace loves her charge, she has to figure out what she really wants — the comforts of home in Trinidad or a life of virtual slavery in Manhattan.

Notably, author Victoria Brown based this novel on her own experiences as an immigrant and nanny in NYC. And, to its credit, Minding Ben isn't exactly what you would think it would be. The Nanny Diaries it is not, although the archetype of nasty, rich bosses is alive and well in Brown's rendition. Minding Ben is darker and sadder than your traditional chick lit nanny book. Brown does a good job painting a realistic picture of life and work in New York for those who don't live in grandiose brownstones. Brown's New York is real and lonely.

Unfortunately, her characters don't come across as three-dimensional as the story she aspires to tell. Grace is sympathetic and conflicted, but she doesn't jump off the page as someone who truly lives and breathes. Nor do her employers. In fact, the characterization of Miriam and Sol is one of the books biggest weaknesses. Brown tries to give them depth and problems, but never goes the extra mile to give those issues and missteps

motivation. Worse than being cardboard cutouts of the World's Worst Bosses, Miriam and Sol don't fully make sense as characters. The closest thing to a really fleshed-out character is Sylvia, the obese woman who takes Grace in when she's on her own in the big city.

And neither does the plot. The novel, while completely interesting, has bad pacing. The story raps up in a matter of pages, but it doesn't rap up any of the real issues of the book. The end of the book felt like a giant shrug. Sadly, a lot of this could have been fixed with the aid of good editing.

In the end, Minding Ben is an okay book. Brown has promise as an original voice. I think a memoir of her real experiences might have read better than a poorly-plotted fictionalized version.

Eliza says

I really liked this book, though I can understand why some people didn't. I noticed a lot of other reviews describing the characters as shallow or flat. I actually the author held back deliberately in a way that almost reminded me of Kazuo Ishiguro. Just because some thing isn't said doesn't mean that it isn't there or isn't important. I also liked that she waited so long to tell us what happened when she first came to New York - almost like she needed that extra time to process it.

I'd love to do this in a book discussion group, particularly if the group already read *The Help*. I think it would be interesting to discuss not just racism in the 60s versus racism today, but our attitudes towards racism in the 60s, which now feels pretty clear cut, to racism today, which can seem infinitely complicated.

Denise says

As a young woman Grace leaves her home in the West Indies for a job as a nanny in New York. She doesn't have the resources to obtain the correct papers, so she has to work illegally. This means she has to take whatever work she can get. Subsequently she ends up in an awful position, underpaid, overworked, and often humiliated. In the end she has to chose between her job and her loyalty to family, friends, and ultimately to herself.

In the beginning I found myself sympathizing with Grace and I quite liked her humility, work ethic, loyalty to her friends, and occasional sense of humor. As the book wore on I got fed up with her willingness to be stepped on by others, even in situations where she could have stood up for herself. I found it unbelievable that someone would stand to be so poorly treated for so little money, rather than return to her family who she loved. The end of the book, while lovely in a fairy tale way, was wholly unrealistic and didn't at all match the harsh reality of the first 300 pages. Not badly written, characters were well developed, and the plot moved along well, but not my favorite by a long shot.
