

Prep: A Novel

By Curtis Sittenfeld

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Curtis Sittenfeld's debut novel, Prep, is an insightful, achingly funny coming-of-age story as well as a brilliant dissection of class, race, and gender in a hothouse of adolescent angst and ambition.

Lee Fiora is an intelligent, observant fourteen-year-old when her father drops her off in front of her dorm at the prestigious Ault School in Massachusetts. She leaves her animated, affectionate family in South Bend, Indiana, at least in part because of the boarding school's glossy brochure, in which boys in sweaters chat in front of old brick buildings, girls in kilts hold lacrosse sticks on pristinely mown athletic fields, and everyone sings hymns in chapel.

As Lee soon learns, Ault is a cloistered world of jaded, attractive teenagers who spend summers on Nantucket and speak in their own clever shorthand. Both intimidated and fascinated by her classmates, Lee becomes a shrewd observer of–and, ultimately, a participant in–their rituals and mores. As a scholarship student, she constantly feels like an outsider and is both drawn to and repelled by other loners. By the time she's a senior, Lee has created a hard-won place for herself at Ault. But when her behavior takes a self-destructive and highly public turn, her carefully crafted identity within the community is shattered.

Ultimately, Lee's experiences–complicated relationships with teachers; intense friendships with other girls; an all-consuming preoccupation with a classmate who is less than a boyfriend and more than a crush; conflicts with her parents, from whom Lee feels increasingly distant, coalesce into a singular portrait of the painful and thrilling adolescence universal to us all.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Curtis Sittenfeld's poignant and occassionally angst-ridden debut novel *Prep* is the story of Lee Fiora, a South Bend, Indiana, teenager who wins a scholarship to the prestigious Ault school, an East Coast institution where "money was everywhere on campus, but it was usually invisible." As we follow Lee through boarding school, we witness firsthand the triumphs and tragedies that shape our heroine's coming-of-age. Yet while Sittenfeld may be a skilled storyteller, her real gift lies in her ability to expertly give voice to what is often described as the most alienating period in a young person's life: high school.

True to its genre, *Prep* is filled with boarding school stereotypes--from the alienated gay student to the picture perfect blond girl; the achingly earnest first-year English teacher and the dreamy star basketball player who never mentions the fact that he's Jewish. Lee's status as an outsider is further affirmed after her parents drive 18 hours in their beat-up Datsun to attend Parent's Weekend, where most of the kids "got trashed and ended up skinny-dipping in the indoor pool" at their parents' fancy hotel. Yet even as the weekend deteriorates into disaster and ends with a heartbreaking slap across the face, Sittenfeld never blames or excuses anyone; rather, she simply incorporates the experience into Lee's sense of self. ("How was I supposed to understand, when I applied at the age of thirteen, that you have your whole life to leave your family?")

By the time Lee graduates from Ault, some readers may tire of her constant worrying and self-doubting obsessions. However, every time we feel close to giving up on her, Sittenfeld reels us back in and makes us root for Lee. In doing so, perhaps we are rooting for every high school student who's ever wanted nothing more than to belong. --*Gisele Toueg*

From Publishers Weekly
A self-conscious outsider navigates the choppy waters of adolescence and a posh boarding school's social politics in Sittenfeld's A-grade coming-of-age debut. The strong narrative voice belongs to Lee Fiora, who leaves South Bend, Ind., for Boston's prestigious Ault School and finds her sense of identity supremely challenged. Now, at 24, she recounts her years learning "everything I needed to know about attracting and alienating people." Sittenfeld neither indulges nor mocks teen angst, but hits it spot on: "I was terrified of unwittingly leaving behind a piece of scrap paper on which were written all my private desires and humiliations. The fact that no such scrap of paper existed... never decreased my fear." Lee sees herself as "one of the mild, boring, peripheral girls" among her privileged classmates, especially the über-popular Aspeth Montgomery, "the kind of girl about whom rock songs were written," and Cross Sugarman, the boy who can devastate with one look ("my life since then has been spent in pursuit of that look"). Her reminiscences, still youthful but more wise, allow her to validate her feelings of loneliness and misery while forgiving herself for her lack of experience and knowledge. The book meanders on its way, light on plot but saturated with heartbreaking humor and written in clean prose. Sittenfeld, who won *Seventeen*'s fiction contest at 16, proves herself a natural in this poignant, truthful book.
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From School Library Journal
Adult/High School–When Lee Fiona arrives at Boston's prestigious Ault boarding school for her freshman year, she enters a world unlike anything she knew in South Bend, IN. "I always worried that someone would notice me," she says of her first bewildering weeks at the school. "And then when no one did, I felt lonely." This dilemma follows her throughout her four years. In her senior year, when she hooks up with star

basketball player Cross Sugarman, she asks that he keep their relationship quiet. But she is appalled when she suspects that he has done just that. Sittenfeld has exquisitely captured the angst of the outsider in this fine coming-of-age novel. Lee is 24 when she recounts her boarding school history. Those few years' perspective give her an authentic voice that makes her sound less eccentric and more mainstream than Salinger's Holden Caulfield. Lee's world is peopled with the geeks and greats of the high school years–super-popular Aspeth Montgomery, who warns Lee away from a relationship with a townie; Aubrey, her math tutor, who professes his unrequited love; and enigmatic Cross, who initiates Lee into sex, but seems less than the full-fledged boyfriend she craves. Much more than stereotypes, *Prep*'s characters, in their depth and humanity, will appeal to readers, who will find themselves rooting for Lee despite her foibles and her insecurities. Her moments of self-doubt will reverberate with adolescents everywhere.–*Patricia Bangs, Fairfax County Public Library System, VA*

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Users Review

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