BOOK REVIEW: GINGERBREAD by Rachel Cohn

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

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taller, more filled out version of Shrimp who just so happens to also be a vision of physical perfection. He may be a coffee mogul, but Java’s no Shrimp. Java’s the guy you have sex fantasies about involving hot tubs and licking chocolate off body parts, the kind of fantasies you would probably go “Yuck” to if the actual oppor-

The one thing he did do for me was arrange for this girl who was eighteen to lend me her birth certificate. I gave him a picture of me and he got a fake ID made with her name on it. So technically the record states that a certain Allison Fromme, school. I was admired. I could have done without the drugs and alcohol, but those were part of the Justin package, a price I was willing to pay. Believe it, I was the girl I would pass by on the street now and go, “Yuck.”

When I told him, the first thing he said was, “But you know I’m planning to, like, go to Princeton. My dad’ll kill me over this.” Not, “How are you doing?” Not, “How are we going to take care of this situation?” It was all about him.
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It had been almost a year since the shit went down. It had started last September, when we returned to boarding school after a summer apart and we could not get our hands off each other. The first time back together we could not even wait long enough to use protection—we didn’t care. And the next morning, I knew: trouble. I just felt it. By the beginning of October, I could not deny the changes in my body: sudden cleavage, morning nausea, deepening sense of panic and hysteria that I could share with no one.

Maybe he said it, but I wasn’t going to congratulate or thank him for his admission that he was the asshole of the century. I just called out to lisBETH, “I’m ready

Suddenly I connected the dots to her crush on Aaron. I thought, Aaron and his little swimmers better watch out when Rhonda lisBETH’s biological clock strikes midnight, because someone is going to be asked to do lisBETH a very, very special favor, one that would keep her future wee’un “all in the family,” quite literally.

taller than her—and said, “This dress belonged to my . . . to our grandmother, Daddy’s mother. Grandma Molly was quite the character. She ran a liquor joint during Prohibition, married five times, cursed like a sailor, and smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. God, she was an incredibly astute businesswoman, though. She made a fortune on the stock market from her divorce settlements. You look a lot like her, you know? Surprised the hell out of me when I first saw you. I think Daddy sees it too—must terrify him! He deserves it, though. That should be his cross to bear, that his secret child should be the image of the mother whose shadow he’s spent a lifetime trying to come out of.”

My Dead Gay Son was riffing on jazz standards, so it was easier to hear than when the band had been playing Sex Pistols covers. Frank said, before a sip of herbal tea, “Cyd Charisse, you are a lovely girl. A little, er, spunky, but a lovely girl. I want you to know that. Your mother and Sid did a beautiful job.”
When I arrived later that afternoon at the Village Idiots after the lunch crowd had left, Danny and Aaron were oblivious to my arrival in the deserted café. They were on the floor making out, the slow, sweet, soul-kissing kind.

“Aaron!” she squeaked and it was sad, her tone was totally soft and you could tell by the forwardness of her chest and the happy expression on her stern face that she had a thing for her brother’s lover. I’ll say this for Frank, he breeds complicated people.

“Not particularly,” I said. How mad was I? A lot. On top of her nasty insinuations was the fact that she was not some cool older chick who would like take me under her wing and divulge important information about men and sex and want to exchange funky clothes and go get pedicures and make puking noises while we
I hooked up with Wallace. My longing for Shrimp—say his name loud and proud—increased exponentially the longer I made out with Luis. I wanted kissing-of-the-soul kissing variety, and not of the sleazy entice-a-stud-over-to-your-place variety.

Not like the sleaze factor stopped me from gettin’ a little booty from Loo-eese. Let’s be real. My hormones were digging it. But then, as his hands were smoothing over my bare thighs under my short skirt and I was running my fingers through his hair and I was wondering if we shouldn’t just go for home base after all because why not we were so close already, what should we hear but a door slam and a female voice exclaim, “Well, I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Luis and I jumped up, all tussled and guilty, to stand before our accuser.

“Aw shit,” Luis said, zipping up the pants my hands had only seconds before unzipped, and tucking his shirt back in. He took his bag of licorice off the coffee table and said, “I’m outtie.” I don’t know which scenario was worse for him: appearing stoned and inebriated or fooling around with the family love child. He scrambled toward the door and muttered, “This family,” as he walked out to leave me alone with the monster who was my older sister Rhonda lisBETH.
Luis plopped down on the sofa and said, “So, what's really on your mind?”

I am a get-to-the-point kind of girl so I told him, “I know you have been checking me out since I came here and I have been checking you out too and I think we should do something about it.”

Luis looked sad and said, “Can't. You’re too young. You’re Frank's . . . you’re Frank's . . . whatever.”

“Do whatevers do this?” I put his hand on my hip and leaned in toward him.

*Please let me live my Wallace fantasy out on you,* I thought, *please help me get it out of my system.*

“Brazen” was the word the headmaster at boarding school used to describe me.

I straddled Luis on the sofa and kissed his neck. “Please, Luis,” I whispered into his ear. “Do me this favor. We don’t have to go all the way. I don’t want you to like have to go to church and say a million Hail Marys because you had consensual sex with an underage girl. But bases one, two, and three are wide open, so why not take a shot at bat?”

So now I was fired up by Java’s voice and pissed off by Nancy. I took a shower to try to cool off. No dice. And who should swim right into my trouble brew but Loo-eese, arriving all glassy-eyed and somewhat tipsy.

“You’re stoned,” I told him as he walked in.
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Luis said, “No, you’re not! Frank’ll kill me!” I think he covered his hand over the phone because there was a pause and what sounded like a voice softly exclaiming, “Fuck!” Then he came back to the phone and said, “What do you say I come over and you and me go get a coffee or some tea?”

“Long Island Iced Tea?” I asked.

Luis said, “NO! I’ll be over soon. Man, girl, I took one look at you and knew you were trouble.” The tone of his voice was not entirely displeased by that observation. “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be over soon.”

“Kay,” I said, and hung up.

Her natural psychic abilities must be greater than Sugar Pie’s because guess who called exactly when I hung up with Luis? My mother. How does she know when I’m about to score?

So I picked up that phone and Gingerbread closed her eyes, and the phone went ring ring and my heart went flutter flutter. After six rings I was about to hang up when a voice answered very sharply, “Ya, what?” Java. My lust factor shot through the ceiling even though I wanted to ask him, How is you-know-who? Is he okay? Does he miss me like I miss him? Have you fired that incompetent piece of shit Autumn yet?

Maybe Frank has produced too many public service announcements as the King of the Advertising World because he said, “Your boyfriend and you . . . you practice . . . you be sure to be safe. The pill is not enough.”

“I know,” I said. It’s funny that I would not want to have this conversation with Nancy, but since Frank is a certified dawg, it did not bother me at all. “Condoms are good, too.” I gave him a friendly punch in the arm and said, “You remember that, old buddy!”

So Frank is off wining and dining clients and hopefully not impregnating impressionable young dancer-models.
“So this is how it went down,” Danny explained. “I was barely in middle school at the time, and so I’ve had to put together the pieces over the years, and my facts are not one-hundred percent reliable, but here’s what I know. Daddy and your mom were having an affair and then she got pregnant. I’m sure they talked about having an abortion—if I’m making you uncomfortable just tell me—but she decided to have the baby. I think she expected Daddy to marry her, and I think Daddy wanted to. My parents’ marriage was awful, you should know that. My mother spent most

In the back room, Danny showed me a few of his special-order naughty cakes which he makes for “bachelor” parties in the West Village and Chelsea. The cakes were not vulgar or crude. They were anatomically correct visions of beauty. Danny

As he stepped outside, he turned back once and mumbled, “And maybe you need some time to figure out your crush on my brother.”

Then he walked out of the studio and into the fog and I closed my eyes so Helen wouldn’t have to witness this final horribleness.

“I can’t believe you,” I said. The coffee throttle was ready to be let loose from my mouth. “I finally get released from that hellhole called my mother’s monster house and you want to ‘talk.’ Are you breaking up with me cuz if you are then (a) this is kind of a bad time to do it and (b) that is so totally lousy of you to bring me coffee first and be all sweet and fine-lookin’ and then turn on me like that.”

Math was my best subject at boarding school. The teacher said I excelled at deductive reasoning.

Here’s one superior feature of Justin’s. He was not a sensitive Let’s Talk About Our Feelings kind of guy. He was all sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. Sometimes that’s a good thing.
“FUCK AUTUMN!” I yelled from the bathroom.

As the Java the Hut mocha with extra whip lushed its way through my bloodstream, I suddenly felt like I actually did want to dance. A zigzag combustible whoo-hoo freedom ride nas-tay kinda dance à la Shrimp 'n' Cyd aka porno Fred 'n' Ginger, and I wished Delia, cute as she was with her masses of orange frizzy hair piled on top of her head and her zebra-print tights, would ditch the joint.

Maybe I am just a sex maniac after all.

Shrimp had some whipped cream on his upper lip and I just couldn't help myself. I leaned over to lick it off, but Shrimp looked into my eyes and knew what was on my mind. He quickly darted his eyes toward Delia and then turned his head to the side, so I wound up giving him an innocent eskimo kiss on the cheek.

That gesture sort of pissed me off.

What did he think I was going to do, bust a move on him right in front of Delia?

Sid and Nancy have forbidden me to see Shrimp until the new school year starts. They said we all need a cooling-off period. I don’t know what they are so afraid of. If they had any sense, they would know he is a dream boyfriend. And it’s not like I am some vestal virgin. The headmaster from boarding school made sure

Don’t tell me who’s in fucking trou-trou-trouble. Nancy is so totally preoccupied with Ash’s weight that I hoped she would want to be done with yelling at me as quickly as possible so she could raid the sugar stash under Ash’s bed.

He is a BABE BABE BABE and so is his brother and I am not going to tolerate this interference from my parental units any longer.

sexy-swish hips. I wonder if a dingo would eat her baby if she had one. Maybe she had Wallace’s secret love child and a dingo ate it one time when she was visiting her grandparents in Australia and now she is, like, totally traumatized and never leaves her hut even though her mom is always trying to make her dance and be happy again.
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Not everyone has to have a little morality lesson like I did. Because the truth is, you never see those teens who talk and talk and talk about sex on TV ever really going after each other all hot and heavy. Because what is supposed to be a secret is that—shh, say it quiet—sex can be quite nice, thankyouverymuch. But it’s better when it’s with a person you care about as much as you want to grope.

How come on TV shows where teens are having sex it’s always such a naughty thing, or something that has to be talked about over and over until the characters can finally get it on. In real life, it is not so hard. Look, want, touch, trouble.

Sex doesn’t always end in trouble. On TV, if you are a teen and you are having sex, you are either (a) not a major character or (b) going to have to learn an Important Lesson, whether it’s pregnancy, AIDS, or any other form of sexually transmitted disease, or you are going to suffer through mucho parental freak-out scenes.

I must be some kind of a gravedigger because Wallace is almost a quarter of a century old and I totally want to unzip that sleeping bag of his and squeeze on in.

On my commune, it will be okay to love two brothers, just not at the same time.

I must be some kind of a gravedigger because Wallace is almost a quarter of a century old and I totally want to unzip that sleeping bag of his and squeeze on in.

La vie en Cyd Charisse is getting awfully cozy, I thought. I have not been in trouble in ages, I have a totally boss boyfriend, a responsible summer job, and Nancy is even doling out permission slips for hanging out with that boy. I might be getting bored, I realized, as I turned around to plant one on Shrimp, but over my shoulder I checked out Wallace and noticed that he was totally checking me out too.

Danger.

Curiosity was burning through my skin and I wanted to ask Delia, What is it like to touch Wallace? To feel the weight of him on you? Luckily before I spoke, my
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I suppose I will burn in hell like in some Greek tragedy for lusting after my boyfriend's brother, he who also happens to be the boyfriend of my new friend Delia from Alaska. But I also suppose there is a long list of deeds for which I might burn in hell, so why not add secret crush on my boyfriend's brother.

I have not made a razor design on any part of my body in eons. I have confined my Shrimp time to making out with him in the Java the Hut supply closet and quick feels on the cold hard sand at the beach during our breaks, but enough is enough. A girl can only be dutiful for so long. The summer solstice is only days away, and Delia and I are planning a party at Wallace and Shrimp's house and I am spending the night whether Sid and Nancy notice or not. I will be as wild as I wanna be.

Nancy was saying to Sid, “Well, at least she’s not dating a drug dealer or turning up pregnant. I guess we should be grateful for that.”

Shrimp sighed again. “Or maybe you’re making the tarot cards be right.”
“You don’t believe in the tarot, do you?” I said.
He did not even hesitate. “Nope,” he said.

“Now I don’t,” I said, and shoved his body off of mine. I was getting really aggravated. I adore Shrimp and maybe one day when I'm thirty or something I will want to marry him if I ever decide I believe in marriage, but that's forever away and

He wriggled his hand out from under my shirt, sat up, and cinched the strings on his drawstring shorts, then leaned down to caress my cheek. “No, Cyd,” he said, “I don’t think Sugar was trying to mess with your mind. I think she was trying to tell you to make more friends besides me and her, and to be open to the possibility that we might not be together for all time.”
“What did you do?”

“I was eighteen years old, unmarried, no job, just lost my Honey and my honey. I did what you did. Only it wasn’t legal then and it was in a back alley basement of the colored doctor. Most painful experience of my life.” Sugar’s beautiful café-au-lait-col-ored skin paled at the memory. I remembered the horrible cramping in my stomach after the procedure, which was performed in a safe and legal environment, so I could only imagine what Sugar must have experienced fifty years ago.

“Are you ever sorry you did?” I asked. Because that’s what haunts me, that later on, I will want to, and not be able to.

“Never,” Sugar said. I believed her, kinda. “If I hadn’t done it, I never would have made my way to California. Got to New York, Paris, Chicago, all them places before coming here. Had me some adventures.” Her coral lips had come back to color and she smiled. “You know, there was a time I thought the world was over for me. And I was but eighteen years old. Thought I had no life left to live. And I look at these cards in front of me, and I see that’s how you’ve been feeling. But the times in your life—good and bad, and they’ll be lots of both—are still ahead of you.

Sugar pointed at the Seven and Five of Swords cards and nodded her head, like she was doing the math from the cards and what I had just told her. “Of course,” she whispered. “Betrayal.” She was not all weepy and oh-let-me-hold-you-poor-baby. She knew what was on my mind. “You did the right thing,” she said, and a massive tide of relief swept through me. “See that Five of Cups card?” she asked. “Notice how two cups are still standing upright? What you can learn from those cards is, maybe you’ve been hurt, but not all is lost.”

Little tiny tears formed in my eyes but I kept them back. “I didn’t want to hurt it,” I said, refusing to choke on the almost-tears. “I just wasn’t ready.”

“You did the right thing, Cyd Charisse,” Sugar Pie repeated. She laid down another card and pointed to the card with the knives staking through a heart. “I can see you didn’t get much help from that sorry thing you used to call ‘boyfriend.’”
“What’s Gingerbread?” he said. He almost sounded annoyed, like he was worried I was speaking in some cryptic code.

What’s Gingerbread? I couldn’t believe my ears. I felt so betrayed I wanted to scream but instead I got mad and went straight to the point. “I need three hundred dollars,” I said, matching his tone of voice. “I’m in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” he asked.

“What kind do you think?” I said. That was all I needed to say. He wired the money to me by dinnertime that night. So counting the time when I was five, that call made it two times I have spoken to my real father in my life.

For a second I had an urge to tell Sugar about last fall, when I was really in trouble. I have not even told Shrimp about that. The only people who know are Justin and my real dad, and that’s only because I had no dinero to take care of my little problema, and Justin kept promising to get the money and every day that passed I threw up more and more but no money from Justin. One day I was almost out of excuses for getting out of gym class, so while I was in the nurse’s office I called Manhattan information when the nurse wasn’t in the room and I got the listing for

When I woke up this morning, I looked at the date on my Swiss Army watch and realized today was the day the doctor estimated as my baby’s due date. That’s when I called Shrimp and asked could we take a field trip. If things were different, I could have been giving birth about now. That baby would have my black hair and Justin’s baby blue eyes. Maybe it was a girl and I could have dressed her up in silk scarves, cat-eye sunglasses, and red lipstick and given her eskimo kisses. I cannot picture that baby any more than that.
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Frank real-dad has a daughter, Rhonda, and a son, Daniel. Rhonda is such a bad-girl name. She is about fifteen years older than me. I bet when she was in high school she smoked hash in the bathroom and skipped school to hang out in Greenwich Village. She probably wore thick liquid black eyeliner, green lipstick, and black tights with tear holes pinned together with safety pins, just to piss off Frank. If I were named Rhonda, that's what I would do.

That would be so cool to call her up one day and just be like, “Yo Rhonda, this is your flave-flave half-sis Cyd Charisse. Let’s hang together but utterly.” She would want to brush my hair until it shimmered and then plait it into a dozen braids. She would give me advice about birth control and maybe sometimes, if we were feeling really giggly, she would pass on secret sexual techniques she learned from reading smutty books when she was my age.

Justin was always stoned, but he never had munchie provisions. He always made me sneak off to 7-Eleven for Doritos and Ring Dings. I was a whore for popularity then, so I would slip past the resident advisor and scale the fences at the end of the school grounds. I would come back all cold and shivering and, like, “Whoo hoo, how spectacularious am I, I shoplifted some extra Fireballs.” Everybody in Justin’s room would be, like, your girlfriend is so cool, man.

Justin would not know what to do with a surfboard if you shoved one up his lacrosse-playing, brie-fed WASP ass.

Shrimp and I will have our own room and we will sleep in a sleeping bag made from native plants. We will figure out how to cultivate that stuff. Gingerbread will have her own doll house under a sea breeze window in our room. We will send her outside to play when we want to fool around.
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and scrappy, and he had short brown hair with a patch of spiked platinum blond at the front towering over his forehead. If I had been a cartoon character, you would have seen the letters L-U-S-T pop into my eyes like the ding-ding-ding display on a Las Vegas slot machine.

Honey Pie was supposed to be the maid of honor at Sugar Pie's wedding to a serviceman Sugar Pie had met in Biloxi, back during World War II. But Honey Pie and the groom ran off together and eloped, and two days later, they were dead. Drove right over a cliff in Nevada when the parking brake disengaged while they were in the backseat getting wild under the shooting stars.

PROFANITY COUNT (and other sensitive words)

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RED FLAGS
Sexual Content
Multiple sex partners
Vulgar
Language
Drugs, Drinking, Smoking
Abortion

CONCLUSION
Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools