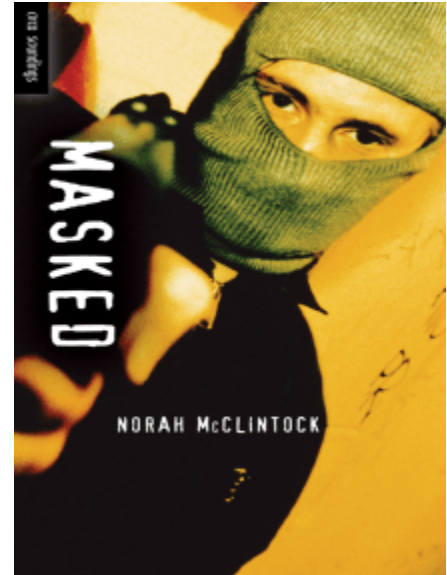


Book Review: Masked by Norah McClintock

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT AVAILABLE AT TEXAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS



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Behind me, Leon says, “Liar. It’s *my* baby.” I’m staring into Corey’s eyes, trying to make him see that I’m telling the truth. He has a little-boy face now— full of fear and wonder. At least, I think that’s what I’m seeing. “A baby?” he says, as if he can hardly believe what I’m telling him. I nod. “Our baby.” “Liar!” Leon says again. “Shut up, dickhead,” Corey yells at him. “She’s not talking to you. She’s talking to me.” “Pregnant?” my dad says. “You got yourself pregnant?” “It’s mine,” Leon says. “Don’t be afraid, Rosie. Tell him the truth. Tell him about us.” “I told you to shut up,” Corey growls.

“Like she would ever touch you.” “She did. She and I—” “Shut up, Leon,” I say. He’s going to ruin everything. “I already told you— it’s not yours.” “But you said—” “I said it because of him.” I nod at my father. “He would have made me get rid of it if there wasn’t a father.” Even with a mask on, Leon manages to look crushed. His eyes are watery. His mouth droops. I can’t help feeling sorry for him. He’s a nice guy. Corey’s expression is different. His eyes are hard now. So is his mouth. He says, “Why would he think the baby is his, Rosie? I don’t believe in immaculate conception, not for you. So what did you do to make him think it’s his baby, huh?”

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But just as I'm about to open the door and go back into the store, I hear her voice loud and clear: "What's up, Dad? I was just about to take a shower, so..." You don't mistake a voice like that— kind of husky, low for a girl, but not old- lady low. Smoky low. **Sexy** low. There are a lot of guys at school who are crazy about that voice. Rosie's voice. Rosie Mirelli. She's in my history class.

Where's Kim? I'd almost be glad to see her grumpy butt marching around the corral this morning, swearing at random horses and kicking any that looked at her the wrong way. She's a total cow. But I gotta say, she gets stuff done around the barn. If she was here, she'd have dragged Carrie and Laura out of bed by their long **sexy** hair. She's the only one who'd dare. Now I remember. It's Kim's day off. **Damn**. No Kim, no Carrie, no Laura. No one else on the schedule. I'll have to round up the horses on my own. All sixty of them.

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Corey is staring at me. I know what he's thinking. He's wondering how much I could have loved him if I went off and got myself **pregnant** with another guy— worse, with a guy like Leon. He doesn't understand. How could he? I was with Corey forever—the whole year. I loved him. I *love* him. I don't think I could ever love anyone who wasn't Corey. But he fooled around with that other girl, and we got into a fight over it. I was the one who started it, even though I knew Corey well enough that I could have—should have—predicted exactly what he would do. Which turned out to be exactly what he did. He dumped me. He took off up to his uncle's place. He wouldn't return my calls. Two days after he left, I found out I was **pregnant**. I could have gone to a clinic. They would have helped me. But it's Corey's baby. How could I get rid of Corey's baby?

I let him do it with me—just once. When I finally told him I was **pregnant**, he assumed the baby was his. I figured my dad wouldn't push me so hard to get rid of it if the guy was still in the picture. I could keep the baby, and then later, when Corey came back—I knew he would eventually—there I'd be, with his baby. He would take me back. We would be a family. But Corey wasn't supposed to find out like this. He wasn't supposed to be hearing about his baby for the first time from Leon. “It's not *our* baby, Leon,” I say. “It's *my* baby.” I see confusion in Leon's eyes. And Corey's.

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First, I took away my dad's gun, and I didn't let his threats and beatings force me to admit it was me. Then I called a shelter and arranged to get us all out of there. I don't know what I was going to do with the gun. I told myself I took it to make sure that he didn't decide to use it. But, really, it felt good having it in case he found us after we left the shelter, in case he threatened my mother again, in case he beat her again. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to my dad after that. No- body made him drive **drunk**. But am I sorry he's gone? No way.

I have no idea whether I'll be able to gather up five dozen horses and herd them in one tidy bunch toward the barn. I'm not a born-and-raised cowhand by any stretch. As far as I know, nobody has ever rounded up on their own. Lucky me. But what else can I do? I can't wait until one of the beautiful **drunkards** staggers in for her shift. That could be hours. By then there'll be guests lined up along the corral fences, waiting for their trail rides. I've got to do it.

No one's at the barn when I get there. I figured as much. Carrie and Laura downed a whole lot of **beer** last night. It's not the first time they haven't shown up for their shift. And I'm certain it won't be the last either. They get away with murder, those two. Jerks. If I ever overslept and missed the start of my shift, I'd sure as hell hear about it. But they're the queen bees, so I keep my head down and my mouth shut.

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Well, yeah, maybe. When you spend fourteen hours working and then another five dancing nonstop. But it's so fun! I glance at the clock again. 6:53. I shove my screaming feet into my cowboy boots. I look at them. They're filthy, caked in **horseshit** after the July rains. I'm not supposed to wear them inside the bunkhouse, but whatever. I can't scrub the crap off either. I've tried. It's all over the bottom of my chaps too. That's a bummer. I spent a lot to have those custom made. That was back when I thought I'd be making \$12.50 an hour.

I push open the screen door leading to the kitchen. Steve, the morning cook, hands me a muffin on my way through. He's nice enough but looks like he just escaped maximum-security prison. Who knows, maybe he did. They're not particularly strict with their hiring practices around here. Steve has so many tattoos it's hard to see any un-inked flesh on his arms. I like him though. He feeds me for free. The other cooks make you punch a meal card if you want so much as a package of saltines. "You look like **shit**, Jill," he says pleasantly. "Kiss my chaps, kitchen boy," I snarl over my shoulder.

Now I remember. It's Kim's day off. **Damn**. No Kim, no Carrie, no Laura. No one else on the schedule. I'll have to round up the horses on my own. All sixty of them.

Nope, adventure rides aren't my thing. It's hard enough for me to hang on to my own **damn** horse, let alone look after someone else's. But I don't say any of this. Maybe this guy will be able to handle himself. Being a wrangler and all.

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Oh **god**. Please don't let Corey come down here. Don't let him startle the guy in the mask. Open the cash drawer, Daddy. Open it and scoop out the cash. Give it to the guy in the mask. Give him anything he wants. Make him go away. And when he does go, call the cops. Call them and tell them what happened. While you're busy with that, I can go.

"I love you," Leon says. "That's why I'm here." I hear an explosion of laughter. It's Corey. "Right," he says. "Nothing says love better than a gun and a mask." Leon's eyes harden in the eyeholes of the balaclava. His lips twist. "For the love of **God**," Mr. Mirelli says, disgusted. "You, Leon, put that gun away and get the hell out of my store before I call the cops." I bet he'll call the cops any- way. "And you." His eyes flick to Corey. "Go away. Rosie's not going anywhere with you. She's busy."

Voices, sudden and loud, jolt me out of my dream. Confused, I try to sit up. But I can't. It feels like I've been tied to the bed with a million tiny threads. I force

one eye open. Turn my head. The clock radio says 6:44. The voices keep shouting. They're coming from the radio. The same radio I've woken up to for the past thirty- five days, at the same **ungodly** hour. Except every morning it gets harder.

I leave the rest of the bunkhouse sleeping, closing the door softly behind me. The cold morning air stings my throat as I hobble across the grass to the main lodge. My feet are killing me. Heavy dew darkens my boots. **God**, it feels like win- ter's coming already. I shiver, wishing I'd dug around to find my gloves.

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A gun.

The guy has a gun. I'm smack in the middle of a real-life armed robbery. The guy in the mask must be on **drugs** or something. He must be desperate. Why else would he be robbing a convenience store? My uncle's friend isn't paying me enough for this.

Where did it come from? I've never seen a gun in the store before. Is it new? There's been a rash of robberies lately. The cops say it's because of all the **drugs** in the neighborhood, which is a relatively new thing. My dad has been complaining about it, about all the stickups and how the only thing that ever happens is that insurance rates go up for the storeowners.

And nervous, just like I am when I pull the balaclava down over my head. Nervous? Make that scared to death, because once you enter a store with the intent to commit a robbery, you're on the wrong side of the law. And once you're on the wrong side, anything can happen. For example, the guy behind the cash register could have a **gun** and he could reach for it, even if you tell him *you* have a **gun**, even if you wave your **gun** in his face. Some store owners are like that. They're cowboys. They don't like to be pushed around. Or maybe they've been robbed before— maybe they've been robbed one time too often— and now here you are, and the man behind the cash means to make you pay for all those other robberies. So maybe he shoots. Or maybe he tries to shoot, but you shoot first. In your mind, it's self-defense. In the law's mind, it's assault while committing a robbery. If the guy dies, it's murder. Either way, if they catch you, you're in bigger trouble than you bargained for.

But it's already too late. I read somewhere that the army figured out back in World War II that soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder aren't cowards. They used to think they were. They used to put **guns** in soldiers' hands and tell them to kill, *kill*, **kill**, and then think there was something wrong with them if they fell apart after they'd obeyed the order. They used to think that real soldiers did what they were told, so if you told them to kill the enemy, they did it, and that was that. It was all okay.

At first I think the guy is a total amateur for leaving the door unlocked. But he's obviously not a complete idiot. Right away he asks if there's anyone else in the store, and he doesn't take Mr. Mirelli's word for it

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when he answers, “No.” He checks it out for himself, waving the **gun** at us to show us he’s not kidding. He keeps the **gun** on us while he checks the aisles. He still has it on us when he ducks down for an instant. When he straightens up—the **gun** hasn’t wavered so much as a millimeter—he’s got Rosie by the arm. Her face is white and her eyes are enormous and fixed on that **gun**. She’s scared. Well, join the club. The guy in the mask shoves her along in front of him. He points the gun at her. “You try anything, and she gets it,” he tells Mr. Mirelli. “You understand?” Mr. Mirelli nods vigorously. He’s like one of those bobble-head toys you see in the back of cars sometimes. He nods and nods and nods.

The guy in the mask doesn’t answer right away. The only thing I can see are his eyes, so I focus in on them. I’m stunned when I see hesitation in them. Mr. Mirelli is offering to empty the cash register for the masked man, and the masked man is standing there holding on to Rosie and looking like he’s actually thinking it over— should he go for it or not? I’m totally confused. He came in here with a mask and a **gun**. He announced it was a stickup. He used that actual word. So what’s he thinking about? Then he waves the **gun** at Mr. Mirelli and me, telling us, okay, yeah, he wants the cash, and he wants us to go on ahead of him. In the instant before Mr. Mirelli turns away from me, I see the relief on his face. I know what he’s thinking. He’s thinking, If I hand over the cash, the guy will go away. I’m thinking the same thing.

The cops see the **gun** in his hand and out come their **guns**. They’re yelling at him, “Put the **gun** down! Put the **gun** down!” When he stoops and lays it on the ground, one of them grabs it. Then they yell at him to get face down on the floor. Suddenly they’re all over him, handcuffing him, reading him his rights, getting him out of the store and into a cop car.

PROFANITY APPROXIMATE COUNT (and other sensitive words)

Dick – 1

Sex(y) – 2

Damn – 2

Shit - 2

RED FLAG

Pregnant – 7

Drunk – 2

Beer – 1

God – 4

Drugs – 2

Gun – 67

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools