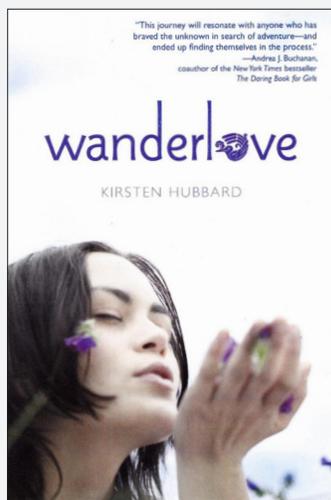


First Opinion: Does International Exploration = Self-Exploration?

Hubbard, Kirsten. *Wanderlove*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2012.

Allison Layfield



Bria Sandoval is eighteen, fresh out of high school, and fresh out of a break-up (or almost). It has been months since Toby, her dream guy, dumped her and decided to move to Chicago. Bria, like many girls, is at the post-breakup stage where she realizes that she has sacrificed too much for a boyfriend; she gave up her friendships and her love of art to spend months isolated with a boyfriend who belittled her talents and accomplishments. Bria sees the remedy in a guided tour of Guatemala. But the free-spirited adventure she was looking for is disappointing; the bus tour moves in and out of key tourist areas, never staying long in one place, and her companions are middle-aged, afraid of their foreign surroundings, and fussy about group activities. When she meets a young brother and sister, Rowan and Starling, who invite her to ditch the tour group and join them on a backpacking adventure, she believes she has found her opportunity to join the culture of young backpackers she has admired from afar.

This epistolary novel combines Bria's travel diaries, emails to friends and parents, and sketches of her experience in Guatemala. Just as the form itself bounces between public and private modes of expression, *Wanderlove* alternates between Bria's present moment and reflections on her relationship with Toby. Her journals chronicle challenging moments of her trip: getting lost in the jungle at night, dealing with a broken-down bus, and learning about Rowan's scary drug past. But these journals also reveal Bria's anger at

herself for throwing away a chance to go to art school, and her fear of befriending Rowan because of her experience with Toby.

While the epistolary form of the novel brings us deep into the private world of Bria Sandoval, the journals are so inwardly focused that the novel downplays her experiences in Guatemala. The result is a self-discovery/love story set against an exotic backdrop. Bria's diaries are full of shallow observations of Guatemala and the people around her. Upon becoming friends with Starling, Bria focuses her jealousy on Starling's clothes. She envies the *appearance* of a carefree, wandering lifestyle rather than the life itself, which often consists of getting lost, sleeping in a lumpy bed, and fighting off mosquitoes. Bria's trip is less an international exploration than a comparison of clothes and lives; it is the kind of girl-competition we expect in a narrative set in an American high school. The result of these constant evaluations of backpacker authenticity through fashion is two-fold: Bria's story seems trivial, her character shallow and self-absorbed. But these admissions also feel honest—Bria bares it all in her journal and is unafraid of appearing shallow, jealous, judgmental, or otherwise flawed.

Although Bria's ruminations on backpacker fashion and her break-up with Toby are annoyingly frequent, the book does deal with some realistic and important themes for young women readers. Bria's travels through Guatemala are visually inspiring, and she slowly returns to her true love—art. As the romantic tension between Bria and Rowan intensifies, Bria increasingly finds time and personal space for drawing. In Rowan, she finds at first a travel companion, then a friend, and finally a boyfriend who respects her relationship with art and does not insist that she share this passion with him. After the couple kisses at an island party, they part ways because both are apparently so damaged by relationships that they are afraid to start a new one. Here the novel may become a formulaic self-discovery/romance novel.

The redeeming aspect of this YA romance is that Bria deals with her relationship issues by finding her own way in the world; she navigates buses and new cities she must pass through in order to return to Starling. Through this experience Bria takes responsibility for herself instead of relying on others to tell her where and how to go about her travels. After doing so, she is able to open herself up to a romantic relationship with Rowan. With the increasing interest in YA romance featuring helpless heroines and controlling (e.g., vampire) lovers, I feel it necessary to applaud Hubbard for writing a protagonist who finds love by exercising her independence and balancing romantic love with love of art, family, and friends.

Ultimately, the book does a great job of capturing the fears and excitement that accompany a young woman's first travels abroad and the growth possible after a girl's first heartbreak. Our main characters are placed in an interesting situation: three people with emotional baggage meet in Central America and decide to explore the world together—

but their emotional baggage itself is uninteresting. By the end of the book, readers may feel like they have accidentally signed up for a disappointing bus tour through young women's adventures in love and Guatemala.

About the Author:

Allison Layfield is currently working towards a PhD in Theory and Cultural Studies at Purdue University.