



The Gallery of Unfinished Girls

Lauren Karcz

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A beautiful and evocative look at identity and creativity, *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* is a stunning debut in magical realism. Perfect for fans of *The Walls Around Us* and *Bone Gap*.

Mercedes Moreno is an artist. At least, she thinks she could be, even though she hasn't been able to paint anything worthwhile in the past year.

Her lack of inspiration might be because her abuela is in a coma. Or the fact that Mercedes is in love with her best friend, Victoria, but is too afraid to admit her true feelings.

Despite Mercedes's creative block, art starts to show up in unexpected ways. A piano appears on her front lawn one morning, and a mysterious new neighbor invites Mercedes to paint with her at the Red Mangrove Estate.

At the Estate, Mercedes can create in ways she hasn't ever before. But Mercedes can't take anything out of the Estate, including her new-found clarity. Mercedes can't live both lives forever, and ultimately she must choose between this perfect world of art and truth and a much messier reality.

"A dreamy and subtle work of art, *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* explores love, family, and the maddening, magical drive to create art."—Adi Alsaid, author of *Let's Get Lost*

The Gallery of Unfinished Girls Details

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Author : Lauren Karcz

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From Reader Review *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* for online ebook

Lauren says

Do I get to mark my own book as "read" now? I've been reading it on and off since 2013. I think it's done. I think it's yours now, world.

(Psst -- if you've reviewed the book here, I'd love if you copied it over to Amazon or another retail site. Doing so really helps the book find readers. Thanks!)

Chiara says

DNF at 41%.

A copy of this novel was provided by HarperCollins for review via Edelweiss.

Why I did not finish *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*:

I wanted to like *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*. The premise sounded good, the cover is gorgeous, and it's about a bisexual Puerto Rican girl. However, *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* was just not for me, and here's why:

- 1) The writing style in this book was at times incredibly simple, and at others it was filled with so many metaphors it was difficult to decipher what was trying to be said through them. I feel like this was really jarring because one minute it would be general descriptions and the next it would be descriptions that had my scratching my head in confusion.
- 2) There was nothing to the main character, Mercedes. I mean, sure, there were parts of her that were fleshed out, but I didn't know what was driving her in this book. I didn't know what was supposed to be pulling me in, because at 41% nothing was really happening at all. I just wanted to engage with her, and her wants and needs, and this didn't happen at all.
- 3) The artistic pretentiousness was next level in *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*. There was just so much angst and artist drama that it was kind of painful to get through. Mercedes tore up her award winning piece, and was painting walls red, and I just couldn't read any more about the pain of being an artist and not being inspired enough.
- 4) Despite the blurb saying that Mercedes is "madly in love" with her best friend, Victoria, I wasn't feeling it. I didn't even really get a feel for the fact that they were best friends. This relationship was more told than shown, with only about three scenes with Victoria occurring in the 41% of the book that I read.
- 5) The side characters weren't fleshed out at all. Even Mercedes' sister. Her friend Tall Jon. Lilia. They all felt kind of cardboard cut-out-y to me. Mercedes' sister was only there to lie to Mercedes' mother when she called, and to suddenly be a prodigy pianist player. Tall Jon was only there to give Mercedes cigarettes and new music. I don't even know what Lilia was there for – I guess to be a Mysterious Artist. None of these

side characters felt like they played any integral role in what was happening, or had lives outside the scenes where they were with Mercedes.

6) I just didn't care what was supposed to happen next, which I guess is because all of the above. Nothing was pulling me to keep reading, and so I didn't.

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trigger warning: absent parents, grandparent in coma (after two strokes), use of ableist language, and shaking building (like in an earthquake) in this novel. please note that this is not a full list of trigger warnings as i did not finish this novel

Acqua says

***The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* the best YA standalone book I've ever read.**

It's a coming-of-age magical realism novel following Mercedes Moreno, a **bisexual Puerto Rican painter** who finds the Red Mangrove Estate, a magical building in which every artist is the best version of themselves.

It's also a book I find really hard to describe. It's sad, but it's the happiest sad book you'll ever read. It's character-driven and has barely any plot, but so much happens. It's surreal, it has magic in it, and yet it feels more real than real life.

The first time I read *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls*, I described it as **a love letter to in-between moments**. And it is – I think the right word to describe it is “**liminal**”. It's about how awkward growing up can be, the weight of your dreams and insecurities, and the things you can't bring yourself to put on paper or say out loud. It's about the magic of these awkward moments, because the awkwardness is worth it.

I haven't found another YA book that describes how it's like to be a teenage girl as well as this one does.

It's also a love letter to art. I have read many books from the point of view of main characters who are artists, and yet none ever got into **what it's like to not like your art, to feel discouraged by its imperfections, to not be able to create when something in your life is making you feel stuck** – stuck because you have a crush on your best friend and you don't even know if she likes girls the same way you do, stuck because you don't know what will happen to your very sick grandmother, stuck because you're afraid to think about your future.

This book is about those feelings. Mercedes gets introduced to a magical palace where everything she'll create, every moment, will always be the best version of itself, with no flaws. And I loved how this aspect was explored.

***The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* talks about perfectionism mostly from the point of view of a painter** and also talks about the feelings of a musician (Mercedes' sister, Angela) **but I think everyone who has ever been an artist will be able to relate to those feelings on some level** – I do, because I felt and sometimes still feel some of these things as a writer. When you're stuck, beginnings are the hardest part – the flaws glare at you, and you can't unsee the fact that everything that looked perfect in your head is imperfect, maybe even ugly, once you try to make it real.

And that's when you're tempted to lose yourself in dreams and fantasies, and let your art live only in your head – or, in Mercedes' case, in a building where everything is perfect but doesn't exist outside.

But this aspect of *The Gallery of Unfinished Girls* isn't only about art. It's about living as well. Life is messy, life is difficult, and life is scary. **It's much easier to live in your dreams when everything around you feels broken**, when you feel like there's no hope for those dreams to ever become real. This is a book that understands this aspect of growing up. It doesn't judge or tell you that dreaming is "giving up on your life" or "not really living" (I'd love to never see that kind of message again; there are moments in your life that hurt too much, and sometimes you need to take a break. But you need to come back, eventually.) It just **tells you that maybe the outside is worth it, and maybe you can move on.**

This book has a nostalgic feel to it. It's not happy, but it's hopeful enough that I can't describe it as a sad book, either. It's about moving forward, and if it makes you sad it's because it makes you feel, and it made me feel a lot of things. **It's the exact opposite of the books I describe as "emotionally flat"**, and the perfect example of how to write a book about sad things without exploiting them for shock value. It made me feel so much because I related to the main character, and she is a very well-written character. Her voice, her thoughts - everything about her narration stood out to me because it felt real, and also because sometimes it was like seeing some of my thoughts on a page.

I don't think I can do the writing justice. It's simple and flows and works so well. Everything about this book was **so defined and detailed it felt just like real life**, even with the magic - maybe even because of the magic: **I've always thought the magic of everyday life is in the details.**

I also thought **the atmosphere was perfect**: I've never been to Florida, but I felt like I was there. To those who say that contemporary books don't have any worldbuilding, I say that there's still the difference between those in which the character floats in blank space and those in which readers who have never been to the US are able to visualize how things look like.

The side characters are all memorable: Angela was my favorite and I'd read a whole book in her PoV, but I'm also partial to Victoria, the maybe-queer, Italian-American (!) girl Mercedes has a crush on. Maybe I have low standards, but it's the first time I've seen an Italian character who is not a stereotype in an American book. She is a dancer, her parents don't own a restaurant, she has no ties with the mafia (...yes this happened), and she is not homophobic. I love her. I also loved Evie (another queer girl! And she's not there for relationship drama!) and everything that has to do with Lilia Solis, but I can't explain why without spoilers.

For a book in which there's very little plot, so many interesting and unexpected things happen.

I also like that this book isn't a romance. I know we're all looking for more f/f books - I am too - but I think there's value in queer stories that aren't a romance and aren't in any way tragic. **Since this book is about the fact that most things are worth trying even when they don't work out, I thought this decision made sense.**

Also, the ending is kind of open in this aspect. (Headcanon time: I totally believe that Mercedes and Victoria got together a few years later.)

Dahlia says

This book was so freaking beautiful, I found myself anxiously awaiting what deceptively simple but impactful phrasing would be used next. I loved its meditations on creativity and the ways it can both intertwine with and inhibit personal growth, and the sister relationship was so sweet. (And yay for A+ bi rep!) Very excited to see what this author does next.

Sarah says

(I received an advance copy of this book for free. Thanks to HarperCollins and Edelweiss.)

“The estate guides us to fulfil its needs,” Lilia says, “with art and music, structure and form, color and light. But it knows what you need, too.”

This was a YA magical realism story about a girl who was an artist, but had a bit of a creative block.

Mercedes was an okay character although she seemed to lack focus a bit when it came to her art, so it was good for her when Lilia turned up to help her.

The storyline in this was about Mercedes and her sister living alone for a short time while their mother went to look after their Abuela who was in a coma. Mercedes was having a bit of artist's block, while her sister suddenly took to playing the piano that appeared in their garden one day. Then a new neighbour turned up – Lilia, who took Mercedes to an old building where she was able to paint, although the artwork couldn't be taken out of the building without it disappearing.

We also got a storyline about Mercedes having romantic feelings toward her best friend Victoria, but the story didn't really focus on the romance.

The ending to this was okay, but overall I found this to be quite an odd story.

6.25 out of 10

Stormy says

4.5 but rounding up because I have been waiting for a book like this for SO LONG and it was just as wonderful as I had hoped.

Elise (TheBookishActress) says

on the blog!!

I'm going to be honest and say I picked this up almost exclusively because of the bi main character. And I am so, so glad I did. This book is freaking amazing and REALLY underrated.

Gallery of Unfinished Girls is an intensely beautiful magical realism story: not at all what I expected, but somehow everything I needed. Karcz manages to pull together themes about growing up, moving on, and

being an artist into the same book. And it works perfectly. The message of the book develops over time and the writing builds.

Don't expect a romance here; this is more of a coming-of-age story. Honestly, **the lack of romance was probably my least favorite part.** I know that sounds ridiculous and out-of-character for me, but it's true. I wished for more of a love story to bring the book together. Yes, the lack of actual romance is realistic, given the situation: no, I still don't particularly like it.

But honestly, I have no other complaints. The characters of this beautiful little book are going to stay with me for a long time. Mercedes' arc is subtly built and has a stunning conclusion. **Karcz doesn't neglect her side characters, though.** Angela, Vic, and Lillia were all layered and multifaceted.

Everything about this book was great, really. There's an emphasis on friendship and family in a very mature sense. There's this emotional quality to the writing that made me feel. I don't know how to quantify emotion or tell you why I felt that way, but I got Mercedes. We're not similar, yet I connected to her in such a real way. She felt like a real person.

I cannot be stopped in the beginning of everything. I cannot hide forever.

The writing style in general is just gorgeous, especially considering Lauren Karcz is a debut author. I did have one nitpick here; she could have used more contractions, especially when they helped sentences flow better. A few stray sentences came across as fairly abrupt or out of place due to this issue.

VERDICT: All in all, *Gallery of Unfinished Girls* was a great look at art with magical realism and interesting characters. I can't wait for this to be published and for everyone to love it like I did. Can't recommend enough!!

Kristine says

What a beautiful book.

Mercedes Moreno is having a tough time. Her abuela is in the hospital, she can't figure out what to paint for the county show, and there's a piano in her yard. Pile on top of that the college responses she's waiting for and the fact that her best friend Victoria—the best friend who could possibly, in a perfect world, love her back—is set on leaving Florida for New York, and everything seems like it's on a downward spiral.

Until, that is, she finds that perfect world in a mysterious studio.

The storytelling in ~~NO MORE BLUES~~ *THE GALLERY OF UNFINISHED GIRLS* (new title yay!) is like if you filled a bucket with magic, dipped in a brush, and painted every single page. It's a story about love and empathy, of friendship and family, fine art and music and dance, of finding yourself in the spaces in between. It made my heart squeeze, it made me smile, it made me tear up, and it made me feel all the feelings. Lauren Karcz brings not only her characters but also their art to life with her lovely, lyrical, utterly evocative style.

Definitely read this if you like Jandy Nelson. Read this book if you like books. Read it if you don't.

It's awesome.

? jamieson ? says

red is the colour of blood, of apples, of the T-shirt I bought on our last, worst all-Moreno family vacation .. red is flame and fury. red is thin and shallow and covers everything. red loves you back

things I have learnt about myself at age 19: I need to read whimsical books via audio instead of physical because *this whimsical writing style never sticks with me* (in audio form it does?)

Anyway, I guess I wanted to be more engaged with this then I was. I was so excited to read this book, and listen the writing is SO PRETTY, but it doesn't work for me. It kind of reminds me of Laini Taylor and Anna Marie McLemore, and I have trouble with both those authors too. But if you love them, you'd most definitely love this

The Gallery of Unfinished Girls follows Mercedes Moreno - a puerto rican bisexual girl. She's an artist who hasn't been able to paint anything since her award winning piece *Food Poisoning #1*, she's also in love with her best friend Victoria and her Abuela is in a coma, meaning she's looking after her little sister Angela while her mum is in Puerto Rico.

First of all this is one of those books where I LOVED the concept and the aesthetic. The magical elements woven into the story and the kinda dreamlike way that things happen was so nice, even if I sometimes found myself disconnected from it. But what I did LOVE LOVE LOVE above all else in this book was the exploration of relationships. I love Mercedes and Victoria! And I could totally relate to the "being in love with a friend" thing, rip. Anyway, I think the way that relationship was done was so nice, I loved them and I loved the way their friendship worked. I also think the relationship between Mercedes and her sister and her mum was so interesting. The dynamics between the characters was my favourite part of this book and my heart hurts at that ending.

Lauren Karcz also managed to bring her themes together so well. This book tackles so many issues, from sexuality to family, to art, to friendships, and to growing into yourself and ties it all together so neatly. The careful and nuanced way in which each of these issues is brought together and linked was really nice, and I loved the use of the Red Mangrove Estate to explore that.

One thing I couldn't engage with as much was the heavy emphasis on art knowledge. I don't know ANYTHING about art and art history so the references to artists and art techniques and things absolutely flew over my head. I felt like I was missing a bit of *meaning* beside all the things mentioned because I just didn't understand. I also wish the romance had been more heavily focussed on, because it was the bit that most interested me, and also the bit I felt was thrown most on the wayside.

Ultimately I think my issues with this book are more of a "its me, not you" kinda thing, because I think this

book is well executed and I love it in theory. But I just couldn't get into it while I was actually READING it. Does that make sense? This book dragged so much for me, but it was just because the writing style wasn't working, not because it was *actually boring*.

But I ABSOLUTELY THINK YOU COULD LOVE THIS !! Yes, you !! It's got such nice writing and oh my goddd that romance actually makes me wanna cry I LOVE THEM. And it's just such a good book except that it didn't work for me? I don't even know how to explain myself what a mess.

Shelly says

I really liked this one. I didn't expect it to be magic realism but I was pleasantly surprised with that element. I'm a huge fan of contemporary-feeling novels that have a hint of magic in them and this was obviously no exception. The writing was spectacular and really immersive and I can't wait to see what's next from this debut author. If you're looking for a novel with a deeply immersive world and compelling/fleshed-out characters, I really recommend this one.

charlotte says

u kno those books which r soft & quiet & make loving girls normalised rather than this Big Thing? yeah pls read this

Allison says

4.5 stars! *.*

Longer RTC after business trip.

Cait • A Page with a View says

3.5 stars. I really wasn't expecting the magical realism in this, so that was a fun surprise! And the stuff with the Estate was rather odd at first, but totally worked in the end.

Mercedes is a bisexual teen who's trying to figure out the different relationships in her life and create new art (mostly about salmonella). She's in love with her best friend, but everything in her world is kind of stuck while her abuela stays in a coma after a stroke. The book description actually sums things up really well, so I won't get into more.

This was a hard rating because I have positive feelings towards the book as a whole now that it's over, but really wasn't ever particularly into the story while reading it. I have zero love for modern art and there was a LOT of that woven throughout the story. I tried not to let my irritation with the artists that Mercedes loved

affect how I viewed the story, but that probably did lessen my enthusiasm...

But right now I do think it was well written and really beautiful in parts! It's an impressive debut and I'd recommend it if you like contemporaries with a hint of magic.

Thank you to the publisher for sending me an ARC.

ellie says

DNF @ Page 84. I don't know. I'm not an artist, so pretty much all of the eighty four pages I read went over my head? She would describe brush strokes and I'm like "Okay, sure...umm, okay." I don't know. I don't think I'm in the right mood for this. I don't know if I ever will be in the right set of mood for this. The thing that made me want to pick this up was the gay girl rep, but then I found out that it never ends up going anywhere.

So like, if I'm not going to get girls in love, then what am I going to keep reading for? Artistic metaphors that I, clearly a peasant human, don't understand? I mean, I read 84 pages of this book and it made me feel so meh. And the side characters and the story felt so choppy. There were little tidbits of memories and then we'd be abruptly pulled into the present, where Mercedes is sad again. God. I don't know.

This wasn't for me. I'm sad to admit it, though.

Anna Priemaza says

I didn't mean to read this book. At least, not yet. But it sucked me in and refused to let go.

When Lauren sent it to me, it was just for the purpose of glancing through it to suggest a new title. I definitely wanted to read it at a future time, but I had a dozen things to do that evening, and really could only spare under an hour to glance through, get a sense of the language, and suggest some titles.

Hours later, the dozens of things I planned to do weren't done, and I was turning the final pages with tears in my eyes.

This book is absolutely lovely. The language and imagery feels like it's being painted on your heart.

But the gorgeous language isn't hollow. It's lays out this riveting story that sucks you in from the first minute, when a piano mysteriously appears on the lawn of Mercedes and Angela, whose mother has gone to look after their Abuela and left them feeling alone. And terribly lost.

And the story doesn't let you go, pulling you into a magical world where art can only be perfect at night, where sisters can only find reach other by losing themselves, and where love is so simple and yet so terribly complex. And it's beautiful.

You should definitely read this book. But be careful, because once you pick it up, you will not be able to put it down. And those twelve things you wanted to do will not get done. And you won't even care.

