

PRAISE FOR **MARTIANS**

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“A bleak and eerie, darkly humorous dystopia.”

The Bookseller

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Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

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KirkusReviews.com

Blythe Woolston's first novel, *The Freak Observer*, won a William C. Morris Debut Award. She is also the author of *Black Helicopters*, which was an American Library Association Best Fiction for Young Adults selection and one of *Kirkus Reviews* Best Books of 2013. Blythe Woolston lives in Billings, Montana, USA.

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BLYTHE WOOLSTON
MARTIANS



WALKER
BOOKS

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For that Earthling, Ray Bradbury—
and for butterflies, raccoons, polar bears,
ostriches, and you—with one condition:
always be looking for the ones you need to help

1

Sexual Responsibility is boring.

It isn't Ms. Brody's fault. She's a good teacher. She switches channels at appropriate moments, tases students who need tasing—*zizzzz-ZAAPPP!*—and she only once got stuck in the garbage can beside her teaching station. She was a teeny bit weepy that day, but no drunker than normal, and I've wondered more than once what made her sit in the trash bucket, barely big enough around to jam her rump to the bottom, her arms not quite reaching the floor and her legs in an awkward, toes-to-the-ceiling position. It is to our credit that none of us took advantage of her predicament to behave badly. When she waved her arms and shouted, "Get out! Get out!" we did exactly

that. And no one picked up her Taser, either to turn it on her in revenge or to wreak amusement on friends and family later.

I'm concerned that today might be a rerun of that episode. Ms. Brody's red, shiny face is more red and shiny than I'd like to see. I believe she might be crying, although she could be using the toilet tissue spooling out of her purse to mop sweat from her brow rather than tears from her eyes. It is hot in here.

This place, Room 2-B, has been my location, Monday through Thursday, during the hours 9 to 16, for the past two years and six months. That's 2,939.5 hours, including at least 419 hours spent on Sexual Responsibility. I fully expected to spend another one year and six months (1,762.5 school hours) in the same place. If you are checking my math, you should know that I've factored in five weeks of school vacation per year and time absent for bathroom visits and food purchasing as allowed. You should also know that I've checked and rechecked my calculations, because I'm bored.

Other students have other hobbies—like violence or using their phones for self-surveillance. I just sit here and do math in my head. I'm good at math, especially ratios and percentages. Those are the foundation of responsible consumer citizenship. Without them, a person can't begin to be a comparison shopper or make adequate use of coupon doubling.

The first morning I was here, Room 2-B was filled to capacity: two students per desk with standing room only along the walls. The room was full of noise and color then, like the pet department at AllMART and for much the same reason:

many live things were all being shelved in the same place. Just as it is appropriate to keep Siamese fighting fish in plastic cups for \$7.99, it is appropriate to keep the lot of us here, in Room 2-B, where we learn not only Sexual Responsibility but also Communication, Math, Corporate History, and Consumer Citizenship. Or those of us who remain learn those things. Desks now outnumber students, what with dropping out, moving away, and—though no one talks about it—ending up dead. I’ve calculated the rate of loss. There will be thirteen of us left on graduation day.

Ms. Brody spools out another yard of tissue. If I knew how many yards of tissue she has stashed, I could predict the future with accuracy. I could tell you if she’s going to run out of tissue before she runs out of tears.

The giant screen at the front of the classroom brightens alive, full of the looming face of someone we all know and trust, at least in a telepresence way, our Governor. Sexual Responsibility always starts with the same prerecorded message reminding us of our pledge to be responsible citizens. My lips start moving around the familiar words. But it’s out of sync. This isn’t the recorded lesson. The Governor’s appearing live, in real time on the education network. Words crawl along the bottom of the screen: “portant announcement * Important announcement * Important announcement * Important announc”

I don’t see Ms. Brody touch the volume control, but suddenly the Governor’s voice is booming from the speakers.

We are all paying attention now, except Ms. Brody, and maybe me, a little bit, because I notice Ms. Brody is focused on the wad of tissue she is crushing in her hand. But really, at this point, the message is so loud we can hear it multiplied and mushified as it rings out in every classroom and spills into the halls. It would require discipline and effort not to hear what the Governor has to say:

Governor: Congratulations, students, yes, congratulations. I'm pleased to announce that you are all, as of this morning, graduated.

My brain does the math: impossible. This message must be intended for another classroom, another school. We here in 2-B have another year and a half before we are fully educated and ready for the future.

Governor: In the interest of efficiency, your school . . . (glances at her phone) . . . Frederick Winslow Taylor High School, is closing permanently as of this date. Each student in attendance will have a personal appointment with the homeroom technician who will provide an e-tificate of graduation and referral to an appropriate entry-level position. We are extremely proud of all of you on this occasion. Welcome to an exciting future. All students should remember that learning

is lifelong, and convenient enrollment in online courses can open new opportunities, including exciting careers in high-demand fields like Taser repair specialist and spam dispersal manager.

(Cut to ad.)

Voice-over: Unicorn Online University, a better future for you . . .

Scene: Smiling person stares at phone. Close-up of screen reveals Unicorn University logo.

Voice-over: . . . full of new and exciting possibilities.

Scene: Smiling person ascends the steps to gleaming glass building and shows phone with logo to receptionist. Close shot of a freshly minted employee badge followed by scene of elevator moving upward.

Voice-over: All thanks to Unicorn Uni. Go, Uni-Uni!

Ms. Brody grabs the volume control and spins the dial until there is only the faintest fanfare of the music that accompanies the ad.

“Abernathy?” says Ms. Brody, and the first of my 2-B classmates squeezes between the crowded rows of desks from the back corner to the front. He stands beside Ms. Brody’s teaching station while she points to her touch screen. Abernathy checks to see if the content has transferred properly to his phone. When he turns to leave, the door is blocked by a security marshal in black body armor. Abernathy knows the drill. He leans his forehead against the wall and puts his hands behind his back so his wrists can be zipcuffed together. Even though it is awkward for him, Abernathy flips the whole room the bird as he leaves. His heart isn’t in it. He’s just doing it because it would be impolite not to say good-bye.

As Zoë Zindleman and also numerical ID 009-99-9999, I am accustomed to being the last called forward. I don’t mind. I see the advantages. Alphanumeric reality has spared me some flu inoculations and many exceptionally bad lunches. Even better, I have plenty of time to myself. It may look like I’m waiting patiently in line, but I’m actually thinking about whatever crosses my mind.

So I sit and wait to take my turn with Ms. Brody, my turn to graduate, ha! Imagine that.

Exciting.

Wow.

Imagine me, a graduate.

I do try, but it doesn’t work. The signal has been disrupted; the screen in my head where I watch my life happen

is frozen, pixilated, blank, and blue. Months of days have just been clipped out of my life so the future can happen right now. Knowing what to imagine career- and aptitude-wise is ordinarily covered in the last year of the curriculum, which has been canceled. I don't know what to expect. Anything could happen. It's much worse than that time when there was a live mouse in the refrigerator. That was unexpected—but it didn't really change the whole future, just the tiny slice of the future spent opening refrigerators and knowing that a mouse might jump out but probably won't.

This? This changes all 1,762.5 hours I was going to be in school. It changes all of the hours that were supposed to happen forever.

That is a very uncomfortable thought, so I'm going to stop thinking it.

I focus on the seeping leak in the ceiling at the back of the room. It is a good distraction. For one thing, it's more interesting than the continuous looping advertisement for Unicorn Uni. For another, that drip means something to me. It's been a part of my life for two years. I remember the day the ceiling tiles collapsed in the back of the room. The spongy slabs spurted wet goo all over the room. That disrupted our learning. We got formal texts of apology from the School AdMin, which included time-sensitive bonus discount points to be used on our next purchase from the GnüdleKart Express, which meant “free lunch” that day.

I wonder if we will get any bonus discount points or

special coupons as graduation gifts. I hope so.

“Masterson?” says Ms. Brody, and Bella Masterson, the girl all the girls want to look like, stands up and walks to the desk at the front of the room. She is an amazing walker, Bella, and she knows it so she provides us, her audience, with time to appreciate her skill.

I know Bella’s name, but she doesn’t know mine. She is always called before I am. It is the natural order of things. And I am more interested in her than she ever could be in me. That is also the natural order of things.

One at a time, the remaining students of 2-B proceed to their individual appointments. Ms. Brody keeps spooling the toilet tissue out of her purse and dropping soggy little wads into the trash bucket. One at a time, the brown drops fall from the ceiling and splash the empty desks at the back of the room. I wonder how many drops have fallen since the leak first oozed along the third-story bathroom pipes and down, through the ceiling of Room 2-B. I can calculate that, although I will need to estimate. My answer will probably be correctish but not accu-price accurate.

I am the very last student in Room 2-B. I step forward to Ms. Brody’s teaching station.

“Yokum?” says Ms. Brody, without looking up from her touch screen.

“No, Zindleman,” I say. I think Yokum has been gone—six months? Maybe a year? I don’t know exactly how long.

I didn't pay that much attention to him when he was here. Why bother with boys? Aside from how they come and go, socializing makes it harder to be sexually responsible. That's what my AnnaMom says, and she knows. I don't remember Yokum's face, but I do remember there used to be a Yokum because the name Yokum comes before Zindleman, or used to, when there was a Yokum.

Ms. Brody taps her screen and then looks up at me while she says, "Zoë, Zoë Zindleman." She scrubs tissue over her eyes, across her cheeks, and under her nose. "Did you know, Zoë, that you are my best student?"

I didn't. I mean, I suspected it. I've seen the result charts for the entire test population and know how my own scores fit into that picture, but no, I never knew for certain that I was the best.

"There was a time, Zoë, when a student like you would be going to university—a real university—after graduation. You could have been an economist or an engineer or an education technician, like me." Ms. Brody's head droops forward, and she covers her face with her hands. "I'm so sorry, Zoë," she says, the words a little muffled by her palms, then she straightens, wipes her face, and continues. "But this is not that time. Zoë, you have been invited to apply for an entry-level position at both AllMART and Q-MART. Please check your phone to make certain that your e-tificate of graduation and your invitations to apply are transmitted."

I do that. They are. I open to confirm receipt. I cloud-archive backups. These are important messages.

Ms. Brody's voice changes again; it's softer, more personal. "Good luck, Zoë. And please accept this gift from me—and your school." She hands me a jumbo-size bag with the AllMART logo on it. Yay! But when I look inside, there is nothing but one old book. They don't sell used books at AllMART. Far as I can see, it is a very weird gift. Maybe Ms. Brody confused it with the trash? It's been a confusing day for all of us.

"Thank you, Ms. Brody. Good-bye," I say.

Ms. Brody tries to smile, but it melts into tears and sweat. She wipes them away and then drops the soggy tissue into the trash bucket.

The school halls are almost empty. There are a few end-of-the-alphabet stragglers like me. There is also a long, snaking line of students wearing plastic riot shackles and zipcuffs. A bus will come soon to take them to the penitentiary. Everyone needs an entry-level position. Everyone needs to start somewhere, get that practical experience, and develop natural skills. Even if, like Abernathy's, the natural skill waiting to be developed is cruelty.

I leave my school and step out into the world. It is strange knowing that whatever tomorrow holds, it is not 2-B.

2

Our house is on the market.

That's why I always come in through the front door. I want to see my home as others see it. I know little stuff can make a big difference to a prospective buyer. I focus on the details. I pinch off a dead daylily. I make certain that the welcome mat is perfectly square with the front door.

Every house on the cul-de-sac—in the whole neighborhood, really—is for sale. But none of those houses are as nice as ours. The landscaping is dead, and the backyard pools are slimy with algae and mosquito larvae. Those people don't even bother to close their doors to keep the raccoons out.

Our lilies are still alive.

It's a little thing, but it matters.

I set the plastic bag with the book in it on the mat and then key the combination into the lock. The slippery bag topples over and the book slides out, pages spread open and ruffled by the hot wind. It looks like a dead butterfly, or it would, if butterflies were more rectangular and had hundreds of papery wings. Sometimes butterflies visit the daylilies by the porch. I have watched them unspool their long sipping-straw tongues and slide them like hollow needles into the secret of the flowers. Then they fly away, or the wind blows them away—it is hard to tell because butterflies seem to have so little control over where they are going. The daylilies are left behind, knocked around by the same wind but rooted in that place. The next day the yellow flower is over, crumpled and damp as a wad of tissue, and the butterfly is gone.

I gather up the book and see the words "*The flowers stirred, opening their hungry yellow mouths.*" I look once more at the daylilies shaking in the wind.

They do not look like hungry little mouths to me.

I step into the foyer, where everything is clean and serene.

It took a lot of work and a hired home stager named Jyll to get it to look so inviting. Keeping it that way is not difficult. We just don't let a crumb fall or a drop of water bead on a faucet handle. We live by the eight-hour rule: If something comes in, it must be out within eight hours. This applies to everything from food to the junk mail gleaned from the mailbox. There is an exception for durable goods, like clothes and appliances, although we can't afford those right now. The eight-hour rule

prevents clutter. It helps us live as gently as ghosts or mannequins in our own home.

But today I am bringing things into the house. I have the bag and the book that Ms. Brody gave me. I'm not sure how the eight-hour rule will apply to them. Even though the gift is more than a little disappointing, I'm glad I have it to hold on to. It seems momentous, graduation I mean, and the e-tificate is not . . . monumental. The bag makes it more real. So I carry it with me into the family-great-room and put it down on the polished acrylic table in front of the couch. That table looks like air, only a bit shinier, and the AllMART bag sits there, hovering in space. It becomes the focal point for the whole room, although the wall of dramatic frosted windows framing the purely theoretical fireplace is supposed to have that role. Jyll, the home-staging consultant who whipped us into shape last winter, would not be pleased.

I sit on the uncomfortable couch and fish the remote from where it hides in the cushions. I press the program buttons for my homework channel. I don't think about it. I don't have to. My fingers know what it means when I sit on the couch with the clicker in my hands. But when the screen wakes, it is frozen on a written message:

Unicorn University

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE

For ordering information, press INFO

I do not press Info. We discontinued all paid television service as part of the new austerity budget. If it isn't free, we don't watch it. Until today that meant I could choose between home-work and local round-the-clock news. Now I have one choice:

≡ CHANNEL 42 ≡

Sallie Lee: Hello, viewers, this is Sallie Lee, Channel 42 News, the news you can use, with today's Big Story. Today we have a special guest, our Governor. Governor, today you privatized what was left of the public school system. (Looks directly at the camera.) Congratulations, graduates!

(Governor smiles, says nothing.)

Sallie Lee: Thanks to innovations like that, you have been able to balance the state budget. Congratulations, Governor! That's an accomplishment.

Governor: (Glances at her phone, smiles.) A balanced budget means nothing. I'm not stopping until the budget is zero. Zero is the only balance point that matters. There is no reason to take money away from people who earn it and then provide services they may not want. Why should I steal from your bank account

**and make your consumer choices for you? It's nuts.
(Looks directly at the camera and shakes her finger.)
I don't believe in government.**

Sallie Lee: Wow!

Yes, wow! I think.

***Sallie Lee: (Looks directly at the camera.) The Governor
is keeping all her campaign promises!***

That's the source of Sallie Lee's moment of wow. Mine is different. At first my wow! is happy surprise. So *that's* why I graduated today! It was for the greater good. I'm a tiny piece, but what happens to me matters! Then my wow! is sad. I feel for the Governor: how painful it must be for her to reject government. It is like rejecting herself. Public service requires heroic sacrifice like that.

I click the remote and turn away from the blank screen.

I've already had so much time to think today, and the stuff I have to think about is so . . . shapeless, sleep is most attractive. I stretch out flat on the tile floor of the kitchen. It's the coolest place in the house. So that's where my AnnaMom finds me, asleep on the kitchen floor, when she comes home hours and hours later.

* * *

AnnaMom is holding a big bag with the Yummy Bunny logo on it, and good smells of ginger and garlic are escaping, even though I know the lids on the food are sealed tight.

Yummy Bunny is my favorite. It is also more expensive, so we only get takeaway in the big bag with the red-checkered bunny on it on very special occasions.

“Thanks, AnnaMom! When did they tell you?”

AnnaMom pauses and looks at me. “Tell me? Tell me what?”

“That I’m graduated. Graduated! Really! I’ve got my e-tificate of graduation and my first job referral. Surprise!” I don’t have to tell her to be surprised. I can see that she really, really is. She isn’t pretending for the sake of celebration. She would never have dropped the bag full of dinner on the floor unless she was genuinely shocked.

“Zoë, baby, what?” says AnnaMom, and she holds her arms open. We lock each other into a hug that neither of us wants to break, but I notice that there is a trickle of soup leaking out of the bag, which is wasteful—and messy—so I give the little extra squeeze that signals hug:over and then gather the food up onto the counter while AnnaMom blots the wetness from the floor.

She looks up from the tiles, which are shining and so clean a person could eat right off them, if they wanted to, which would be a weird thing to want. “Really, Zoë,” says AnnaMom. “Did I hear you right? Did you say you are graduated? With a job referral?”

“That’s exactly what I said. Two invitations to apply, actually.”

“Wow! Fantastic! This is huge.”

I open the lids on the containers and snap the disposable chopsticks apart so we can use them. There is so much food: rice balls and soup and noodles and two boxes of tempura . . . and sticky pickled plums and tiny pink sweets to enjoy with cups of green tea. It’s a crazy feast. A big family celebration. And it’s also confusing, because my AnnaMom didn’t know that I graduated today, so we must also be celebrating something else. The house! The house! We must have sold the house. I wait for my AnnaMom to say it so we can hug again, and probably hop around while we are hugging because Wow! We sold the house.

But that isn’t what she says.

“I’m moving,” says AnnaMom.

“We’re moving?”

“Tomorrow,” she says. “I’m moving. I was worried, you know, about how it would be for you here, alone, trying to finish school, but . . .”

“. . . now we can go together?”

“. . . now it’s going to be so much less complicated. For you. Here. I’m not worried.”

Me. Here.

“Eat some tempura before it gets soggy,” says AnnaMom.

So I do. I pick up a big piece of tempura between the tips of my chopsticks and transport it to my mouth. I’m chewing, but

I can't taste anything. I could be eating a wad of toilet paper deep-fried in a lovely light batter.

"This way, you can stay here, rent-free, until the foreclosure. And you can keep the flowers green and everything lovely, just in case, you know, the market improves suddenly. Soup?"

I swallow and take the soup spoon she holds out to me. I can be trusted to live alone but not to feed myself. Ah, AnnaMom. It would be funny if I weren't so scared.

We sit together on the slightly uncomfortable couch. We used to have a very comfy couch, but Jyll, the home stager, said it reeked of routine low expectations and had to be replaced immediately if we wanted the house to sell. All furniture tells a story, according to Jyll. When people see a couch like the one she provided, they imagine fun family togetherness. That's a story that will sell, sell, sell.

Only it hasn't yet. So we need to change the story. I assume that Jyll will show up and haul the couch away, because the story of family togetherness, fun or not, has been canceled. I assume this will happen because I have seen the moving vans come and empty out the other houses on the cul-de-sac. AnnaMom and I just sit and don't say a word about our circumstances.

We do not say, either of us, what we both know is true: She is the reason we are in this situation. She made a choice a long time ago. She chose life, me, Zoë. And now we are both living with the consequences.

* * *

Anna Meric was a few months older than I am right now when she came to the conclusion she was pregnant. She had tried to come to every other possible conclusion—deadly cancer, anorexia, just losing track of time—but motherhood was headed her direction like a truckload of radioactive bricks, and finally she had to admit it. She admitted it several times, in fact, because confession is good for a person.

About twelve hours after the last time she confessed it, I was born. A couple hours later, Anna Meric, now my AnnaMom, was filling out forms that would shift the responsibility for me to someone else, who wanted it. This was the course of action proposed by the people in charge, and Anna could see the advantages, really she could. But she refused to sign the papers. Her act of defiance surprised her-own-self as much as anyone. Instead of doing what was obviously the best thing for everyone involved, she demanded the forms that would confirm that I was her daughter and she was my mom. While she was at it, she named me. Zoë, that makes sense; it means life. The Zindleman? That she just made up. It was not a name she borrowed from my father. I did have a father, but his approach to the whole matter of me was to admit his part in this fiasco of irresponsibility and then waive all rights.

His name was Ed Gorton.

Gorton isn't a very musical name.

I like Zindleman better.

In some alternative universe, I suppose Ed and Anna

got married and I was the first of many children. In some alternative universe, I was never conceived at all. But in this universe, I'm Zoë Zindleman, whose biological father, Ed Gorton, isn't in the picture.

Anna Meric started over, although her decision to keep me was a complicating factor. It is hard to make a good impression when you walk into a job interview trailing a streamer of toilet paper. It's even harder when the toilet paper isn't stuck to the bottom of a shoe, but is tangled up in the elastic of some barely there underpants along with the hem of a businesslike suit. Anna Meric had the social disadvantage of walking around with her carelessness exposed.

Somehow she managed to overcome that first impression. She got a job. She worked very, very hard. Then Ed Gorton got kicked in the head by an ostrich. It killed him. It's an unusual way to die, but not unheard of. The papers he had signed in the hospital established me as his sole beneficiary. We had money enough to move into this fine house in an excellent neighborhood and live happily ever after. If anyone asked, Anna Meric could honestly explain why the daddy wasn't in the picture with tragic death, which is respectable, although I think she left out the detail about the ostrich.