



*The Early Girls* is a strong tale that begins with a handful of character sketches. At this stage the main characters are all very young but already have very different life experiences. There's leadership, confidence, fear, intelligence, and abandonment.

We're already aware that the sanctuary of the nursery school isn't going to be there forever so whilst it's interesting learning about the individual characters, it's hard not to look over your shoulder, waiting for a threat to arrive. The lives of the young characters are simple and rich all at once, and the scene is solidly set. Most readers can think of a simple place that is actually much more complex once you dig a little deeper.

The story is broken into parts so it's almost a breath of relief when we reach the end of part one unscathed! But there is something brought in that you know will come to light later. Let's leave it there, no spoilers beyond the back of the book.

Part two pushes the lives of the protagonists forward and we see the buds turn into flowers. There's a nicely vivid series of dialogues linked to a party that really bring the characters on, cementing their position and making the reader properly care about them. And an abrupt shock that serves to remind us that there is something lurking.

As the story develops, we see a change in tone as the antagonist group gets involved. This is tightly controlled and the structure of the book is used to keep you wondering how it will play out. The risks begin to escalate as the invention mentioned on the back of the book becomes increasingly important.

It's tricky to talk much more without giving away the plot, but there is a nice hint of a link to the previous disappearances. The story flirts with some light science, dips into mystery, and engages with some thriller elements. They all come together to form a wholesome narrative that is as much about friendship and the bonds formed through childhood, as anything else.

It all closes with an epilogue that offers explanation, closure and the tease of more to come.

Overall, *The Early Girls* feels like a pilot episode that has its own strengths but could easily build to a series. The group of friends feels natural, and they are able to expand to include others easily. It's a great palette for future ideas. In addition, the previous disappearances definitely have opportunity for expansion and if they are given the same treatment, then they could offer up a great deal more.

As a standalone story this is charming, and the friendships feel real. There is a lovely mix of skills and flaws, and no star of the show allowed to wholly dominate. What is at the heart of things is friendship and the forgiveness that can provide when needed. It is the group's friendship that holds them together, so that even when they have gone off on different paths they can come back together easily. The sort of friends that if you met up after ten years it would be almost like one of you had only just left the room.

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