



# **Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession**

*Alice Bolin*

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## **Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession** Alice Bolin

A collection of poignant, perceptive essays that expertly blends the personal and political in an exploration of American culture through the lens of our obsession with dead women.

In her debut collection, Alice Bolin turns a critical eye to literature and pop culture, the way media consumption reflects American society, and her own place within it. From essays on Joan Didion and James Baldwin to *Twin Peaks*, Britney Spears, and *Serial*, Bolin illuminates our widespread obsession with women who are abused, killed, and disenfranchised, and whose bodies (dead and alive) are used as props to bolster a man's story.

From chronicling life in Los Angeles to dissecting the "Dead Girl Show" to analyzing literary witches and werewolves, this collection challenges the narratives we create and tell ourselves, delving into the hazards of toxic masculinity and those of white womanhood. Beginning with the problem of dead women in fiction, it expands to the larger problems of living women—both the persistent injustices they suffer and the oppression that white women help perpetrate.

Sharp, incisive, and revelatory, *Dead Girls* is a much-needed dialogue on women's role in the media and in our culture.

## **Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession Details**

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Author : Alice Bolin

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# From Reader Review *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* for online ebook

## Makenzie says

My favourites in this collection were definitely "Toward a Theory of a Dead Girl Show," "The Husband Did It," and "A Teen Witch's Guide to Staying Alive." I also loved Bolin's writing about general pop culture, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, Twin Peaks, and Lana Del Rey, and I fell particularly in love with her musings about LA and her focus on Joan Didion. This book is somewhat falsely marketed as most of it past the first essay strays from a cultural criticism of the "dead girl" trope, although it is a topic that reoccurs from time to time throughout. I would recommend this for fans of Leslie Jamieson or Rebecca Solnit.

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## Lotte says

**3.5/5.** Alice Bolin is undoubtedly a very talented literary critic and writer and I enjoyed reading this overall, but I can't help but feel misled by the marketing of this book. The subtitle and blurb promise a thorough exploration of the Dead Girl trope so prevalent in (pop) culture, but only a couple of essays actually focus on this. Most of the other texts are about Los Angeles and depictions of L.A. (and the lifestyle it suggests) in literature (most predominantly, Joan Didion's writing – she mentions Joan Didion *a lot*). Some essays also focus on literary and cultural representations of teenage girlhood, and these were definitely my favourites (for example, there's a chapter that talks about one of my favourite books, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*). Ultimately however, this book uses the same marketing it tries to critique (using the eponymous Dead Girl to lure in readers), which Bolin seems to be aware of because she mentions it in the beginning, but which I still feel a bit cheated by. I'd recommend this essay collection, because it made me question and reconsider aspects of American culture I had never even thought of to question before, but beware that what you see isn't exactly what you get.

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## Emily says

I thought this would be a convicting critique of a genre I really like, but the real reasons I had to stop reading was:

a.) she appeared to have watched/read at least two of the subjects she was critiquing maybe one time and her analysis shows it. She talks about Twin Peaks' typical centering of the male narrative and she's totally right. But she didn't bring in the panned, unpopular film follow-up *Fire Walk with Me*, which tells the story of Laura Palmer's death entirely from her POV. The fact that she completely disregarded this piece makes her complicit in her own criticism—why even talk about an attempt to reframe a male centric narrative? Why did nobody want to see that? What were the shortcomings of a man's attempt to tell a story from the "dead girl" viewpoint? What a waste.

Also she writes a fiveish page essay about how *The Big Lebowski* is kinda like a Raymond Chandler book and she quotes ITS WIKIPEDIA PAGE. She can't even be bothered to click the reference link at the bottom of the page to see the original interview source of the quote she uses. What kind of advance did she get for this amateurish "research?"

b.) She used a quote from Christopher Hitchens, a notorious misogynist, to criticize the professed feminism of Stieg Larsson. Couldn't have found a better critique from, oh I don't know, a lower profile woman scholar who doesn't reveal your antiquated cultural snobbery?

c.) She outs her dad as "autistic" after a very long and uncomfortable essay where she calls him "manic pixie dream dad." She does this after telling the reader that her father is not interested or served well by discussing his diagnosis. She uses his love and defense of Swedish crime novels as a way of proving he is non-neurotypical. I see no indication that he consented to having this information shared—quite the opposite.

Normally I prefer to show authors some grace, but I read almost half this book before calling it. The feminist critiques were glaringly obvious to any woman who enjoys the genre, and that says to me that she's writing it not for us, but for women who want to feel superior to us. I'm also genuinely offended by that essay about her dad. Disgusting.

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### **Emily says**

Let's call this one two and a half stars. Alice Bolin is smart and talented--I can say that confidently--but she's doing too much at one time. How she landed on the title is completely beyond me, because the Dead Girls to which she is referring are mentioned only sparingly. A better title for this book would be "I Moved to L.A. and it Made Me Sad," with the subtitle "Can I mention every one of Joan Didion's published works in 250 pages?" And that's not to say that I WOULDN'T want to read that book. In fact I know I WOULD want to! It's just not what I thought I was signing up for this time. Alice makes some interesting cultural commentary, but it drowns in meandering memoir and I can't help but feel misled.

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### **Rebecca Renner says**

I enjoyed reading this book. Bolin is great at personal essays and cultural criticism. She left some questions unanswered though. My review for Broadly digs into that: [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/articl...](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/articl...)

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### **Kusaimamekirai says**

The essays on the female body in American film, literature and television, or "The Dead Girl", were very insightful. As someone who often analyzes (too much according to more than one annoyed friend) the images and words that flicker in front of my eyes, I had never really thought about what the author writes here about why the "dead girl" plot device is so popular. She argues that it is because it becomes a tableau for predominately men to work out their own issues:

*"There can be no redemption for the Dead Girl, but it is available to the person who is solving her murder. Just as for the murderers, for the detectives in True Detective and Twin Peaks, the victim's body is a neutral arena on which to work out male problems....Clearly Dead Girls help us work out our complicated feelings about the privileged status of white women in our culture. The paradox of the perfect victim, effacing the deaths of leagues of nonwhite or poor or ugly or disabled or immigrant or drug-addicted or gay or trans*

*victims, encapsulates the combination of worshipful covetousness and violent rage that drives the Dead Girl Show."*

I don't agree with all of her argument here, however she makes her point quite eloquently and does raise some disturbing issues as to why this trope has the popularity it does. I would have in fact liked her to explore this concept further however the other essays meander a bit into areas that I personally didn't find particularly interesting. A good part of the book is taken up with her analyzing Joan Didion's essays about Los Angeles as the author intersperses her own stories going from Idaho, Nebraska and Los Angeles. After a certain amount of time, the writing about Didion feels like a bridge the author uses to talk about her own relationships and experiences in Los Angeles. In and of itself there is nothing wrong with that, but when your experiences revolve around a string of meaningless relationships (its telling or perhaps intentional that she identifies them only by their first initials) being broke, or how proud you are to have never been in an Ikea when your friends take you there, you start to wonder how we got so far away from the dead girls. By the time she gloats about how her friend taught her to steal bags of coffee from her job, I had pretty much ceased having sympathy or any positive feelings about her at all. Narcissism and amorality will usually have that effect on me.

To sum up, there is some very strong and interesting writing to be found here in the book's initial essays. However the further away we get from the premise of the book and into the author's vanity, the book suffers.

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## **Michael says**

Mispackaged and mismarketed, *Dead Girls* is at its most interesting when author Alice Bolin strays from her essay collection's ostensible theme. The pieces on representations of white girlhood and womanhood in popular culture stand out as highlights, from Bolin's analysis of Britney Spears's music videos to her discussion of MTV reality shows. By contrast, the essays on the trope of the so-called Dead Girl are intellectually lazy, in that the author raises several promising claims but fails to develop or nuance them over the course of each essay. Several essays focus on the author's move to Los Angeles, leaving one wondering why the publisher did not center the book's marketing on life in the city.

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## **♥ says**

I cannot believe I'm only giving this two stars. How is that even possible?! I was so sure this would be one of my top reads of 2018. I felt like I read a different book than what was advertised though.

I wanted to read *Dead Girls* based off the part of its blurb that said: "*From essays on Joan Didion and James Baldwin to Twin Peaks, Britney Spears, and Serial, Bolin illuminates our widespread obsession with women who are abused, killed, and disenfranchised, and whose bodies (dead and alive) are used as props to bolster a man's story.*"

Unfortunately, only about 25% of the book is actually about that. And that's being generous.

The other three quarters of the book is about the author's experience of moving to Los Angeles, her various LA roommates, and her love for Joan Didion. Seriously, this woman *loves* Joan Didion. I knew she'd be mentioned somewhere from the book's summary, but I didn't imagine she, as well as her essays and writings

and opinions, would be mentioned so frequently throughout the entire book. At one point, in one chapter in particular, I couldn't find a single word about the '*widespread obsession with women who are abused, killed, and disenfranchised, and whose bodies (dead and alive) are used as props to bolster a man's story*', but you can bet that every other page - every other page! - mentioned or quoted Joan Didion.

I will say that the small instances of passages discussing the Dead Girl subject were absolutely on point and extremely interesting. But it just wasn't enough. I wish I could've cared about the author's personal life, but I didn't sign up for a memoir.

If you're wanting to read this for the same reason I did, I feel like you'll be terribly disappointed with what you actually get, like I was.

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### **Carol says**

So approximately 50 pages of this 288 page book dealt with Dead Girls--and the author made some excellent points and gave me a lot to consider as I consume pop culture. Those chapters read like the best essays from Bitch Magazine. Consume your pop culture, but be very aware of what we're actually hearing/watching/reading.

However.

Everything else was disappointing. If I wanted to read a book about how someone moved to LA and didn't like it, or loved to talk about Joan Didion's take on California, I would have expected the title to reflect that. Once I realized the author was going to keep going back to the LA/Didion well, I started skimming (this was around page 120) and stopped here and there when it looked like we might get back to the "American Obsession" but we never did.

I would love to read more from this author, as what I did read was usually insightful and at times humorous. That said, I think the publisher needs to more accurately title/blurb/edit these collections in future.

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### **Natalie says**

This isn't quite the meditation on dead girls and women as a particular obsession of our culture that I wanted. There are a handful of essays that touch on it, but this is mostly the navel-gazing of a privileged white girl who read too much Joan Didion, moved to Los Angeles on a whim, and how it made her Very Sad.

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### **Claudia Cortese says**

This is the best essay collection I have read in years. It's true, as others have noted, that the dead girl trope is addressed most directly in the first few essays, but the trope threads throughout the entire collection. The reader will think that they are reading an essay about Britney Spears, and there the dead girl is. Or the reader will think that they are reading an essay about Los Angeles, or Joan Didion, or female friendships, or reality TV, and there the dead girl is again. I love how discursive these essays are. They wander. They meander. They move. In other words, they are alive. Bolin weaves meticulous research with her own personal

experiences; the essays move between her own life and the larger issues the book explores. These essays are deeply intelligent, deeply feminist. Bolin's sentences wowed me throughout the book. Here are some of my favorites, though I underlined so much more:

"Heterosexual relationships are dangerous: one must balance the necessity of sex with the impossibility of trust," "[The] belief in the falsehood of narrative and the truth of fragmentation is another story we tell ourselves," "[In] True Detective and Twin Peaks, the victim's body is a neutral arena on which to work out male problems."

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### **Kazen says**

I have mixed feelings about *Dead Girls* - it starts amazing but sadly I had trouble getting all the way to the end.

I do want to be clear - the first part, about the titular women American culture obsesses over, is incredible. Bolin talks about "Dead Girl Shows" that use the memory of women-who-were to tell stories about the men who killed them or seek to revenge their deaths. Instead of looking at the impulse some men have to prey on young women the narrative of these shows concentrates on the killer's psychology and methods, making the practice seem inevitable and beyond the man's control. I highlighted many, many passages from this section and will be revisiting the essays so I can chew over them more.

That's only part one of four, though. The second section takes a step away and examines women who are living but have been used to sell a story in a related way. I like *Lonely Heart*, about the contradictions and tragedy in Britney Spears' fame, but otherwise my interest started to wane.

If the book were a tire that's where the slow leak started, with a more steady *whoosh* becoming apparent over the last two parts. Bolin gets deep into her experience of being lonely after moving to the West coast and I couldn't get on board. It's an amalgamation of things I have a hard time caring about or connecting with (LA, Joan Didion, accounts of roommates and boyfriends) with books that we are assumed to know but oftentimes I did not. If you love so-called "Hello to All That/Goodbye to All That" essays, worship Didion, and don't mind a jumble of thought, you'll do better here than I.

It's hard for me to rate *Dead Girls* because it went from a compulsively readable, fascinating ride to a flat tire I had trouble rolling over the finish line. I thought it would be a great fit for my Serial Killer Summer but sadly only the first quarter or so fit the bill.

*Thanks to William Morrow and Edelweiss for providing a review copy.*

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### **Emily says**

The blurb on the back of the book explains that the book will take you through dead women in fiction and the larger problems of living women. And I suppose it does, kind of, do that, starting by dipping its toes in the waters of "Dead Girl Shows" like *True Detective* and *Twin Peaks*, then devolving into dissections of books, movies, and songs where women have some sort of troubling presence--all loosely tied to the writer's life/background--then devolving into anecdotes of the writer's loneliness in LA. But, to be honest, I didn't actually get anything enlightening about abused/killed/disenfranchised women out of these essays, as the

blurb intimates I would. There were some interesting correlations, some interesting anecdotes. But when I closed the book at the end, I basically felt like I had just read a disjointed collection of women's studies term papers rather than a "Sharp, incisive, and revelatory...much-needed dialogue on the woman's role in the media and our culture."

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### **Bekki says**

i don't understand how she ended up with the title of this book. i'd say about 40 pages are dedicated to the american obsession of the "dead girl" trope and then the rest segues into bolin's self indulgent memoir that truly has no direction. she writes about her father, then her move to LA, her boring white girl problems, AND THEN throws in basically every piece joan didion has ever written, seeming to idolize her, then drags her for being classist, which actually made me laugh out loud because this woman truly has some spectacular blinders on it she thinks she is better than joan. not to say a criticism of joan has no merit, but seriously, the irony.

this book is 20% dead girls (if that), 50% dull memoir, 20% joan didion musings, and 10% "throwing in some POC writers so i don't seem racist."

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### **Autumn says**

Even though this book didn't examine the dead girl trope as much as I wanted it to, it's still an incredible examination of the forces that create an environment that allows the dead girl trope to thrive. She also looks at the ways white women and white feminism are both trapped by, perpetrators, and by-products of the male gaze. Honestly, it's one of the most critically interrogative essay collections I've read in a while. She even points out and examines the inherent problems of the personal essay. I'll definitely be re-reading this one and marking it up as I go.

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