



Sub Rosa

Amber Dawn

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In this stunning, Lambda Literary Award-winning debut novel, Amber Dawn subverts the classic hero's quest adventure to create a dark post-feminist vision. *Sub Rosa*'s reluctant heroine is a teenaged runaway named "Little"; she stumbles upon an underground society of ghosts and magicians, missing girls and would-be johns: a place called Sub Rosa. Not long after she is initiated into this family of magical prostitutes, Little is called upon to lead them through a maze of feral darkness: a calling burdened with grotesque enemies, strange allies, and memories from a foggy past. *Sub Rosa* is a beautiful, gutsy, fantastical allegory of our times.

Sub Rosa Details

Date : Published September 7th 2010 by Arsenal Pulp Press (first published 2010)

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Author : Amber Dawn

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Genre : Fiction, Gbt, Queer, Fantasy, Lgbt, Magical Realism, Cultural, Canada

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From Reader Review Sub Rosa for online ebook

Katie says

Engaging story, so-so pacing, terrible writing, VERY heavy-handed. gag. I suspect my friends who claim to like this book so much do so because it is "radical". Shame on them for settling.

Cow says

Really torn on this one. There's a lot to love, but it never quite comes together. The front 1/3 of the book is good world building, and the back 1/3 is the story that the whole thing should have been. The middle 1/3 is a complete mess and I almost quit reading during it; even the writing style (good in the other parts) falls apart in a way that feels unedited and unrevised. (And in a minor grammatical quibble, some editor really needs to figure out 'to' vs 'too'.)

The book just didn't sit right with me, and never came together. It took me a while to figure out why, but it's this: the supposedly-paradisaical setting of Sub Rosa sounds like the worst, most insufferable place to live! The people, the attitudes, everything...what's supposed to be paradise, a refuge, just sounds like The Actual Worst. The author hints at self-awareness about this later in the book but never quite gets there. I leave highly, highly unconvinced that anyone in this world actually thinks they're better off than living in ~the city~.

But there really is a lot to love here. A few of the characters and their journey together really do work. It tells a good story, even if it tells it in only 1/3 of the book and rushes it to reach the finish. And it has a setting and a world that is very different.

This is the author's first novel, and as a first novel, there's a lot of potential here.

CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says

Vancouver writer Amber Dawn's Sub Rosa, published in 2010 by the radical and remarkable publishing house Arsenal Pulp Press, is a fantasy novel that is both familiar and fantastic. It deals with (what should be) a recognized reality in its depiction of gutsy, gritty, strong women doing sex work in Vancouver's East end. But Dawn—a writer gutsy, gritty, and strong like her characters—has imagined a world that is a glittery yet tough fable twist on the story of a teenage runaway turned sex worker... see the rest of my review at <http://caseythecanadianlesbrarian.wor...>

Violet says

Amazing. Really, that's the best 'review' I can provide. Not like anything I've read in a long, long time. And really well-written.

Jean Roberta says

The title of this haunting first novel literally means "beneath the rose," usually applied to a secret meeting. In this case, Sub Rosa is an actual neighborhood that exists in its own dimension in a city that resembles Vancouver, Canada. It's a luxurious haven for sex workers who have literally paid their dues by serving an apprenticeship in a dangerous place called "the Dark."

Even in the real world, the sex trade has a culture of its own. Sexual orientation is fluid in that milieu, where pimps usually have several "wives" apiece, and where sex workers have motives both to compete with each other and to stick together. Like the shadowy regulars in gay bars of the 1950s, sex workers must cope with the disapproval of "straight" society and the constant risk of arrest. Like characters in role-playing games, sex workers base their working personas on their physical characteristics and abilities, and they have single names that their parents never gave them.

In this novel, the fog of misunderstanding and invisibility that separates the sex trade from the rest of society is a real barrier of dense air. The narrator is a teenage runaway called "Little" who crosses the barrier when she is rescued or abducted from a life of couch-surfing by a charismatic man named Arsen. He is a pimp who shows genuine care for his "wives," and he has paid some dues of his own. Joining his "family" is the best option available to Little.

Little's mentor in Sub Rosa is a voluptuous woman called Candy; she is Arsen's "first wife," whose job is to train the newer recruits. She explains the vocation of the "Glories," a community of elegant prostitutes:

"Men got no problem sexin' a girl who hates 'em, then tossin' her away after. Plenty of men visit the skids and do just that. But a Glory . . . a Glory can turn these devils good again. We get right inside them and pull out their deepest wants. We become more than sex, we nurse their deepest insides, the parts that aren't covered in city filth. We make them good again . . . and since we do this, we never have to be ill-treated no more. We get everythin' we want. Sub Rosa never dries up. Its wealth is endless, and it's all for us. Glories rule Sub Rosa, you'll see, Little. Soon you'll have everythin' you ever wanted."

The Glories even have magical powers. Soon after her debut (a big party like the "coming-out" of a nineteenth-century socialite), Little discovers that she has a phantom third hand that she can learn to control. The hand seems to be connected to her new ring, a black pearl that was assigned to her. This jewel, in turn, seems somehow connected to the Dark, that place of trauma which causes partial or total amnesia.

Is Sub Rosa a utopia or a dystopia? On the surface, it looks like an inviting alternative to "the skids," yet those who live there have few or no memories of their past lives, and no contact with anyone from the outside except their customers. Little's recovery of her real name and her growing desire to claim her own past leads to an epiphany: the only way back to reality is to willingly re-enter the Dark. Little becomes an unlikely heroine who leads her companions to their own truths.

This novel is both whimsical and profound, and seems likely to acquire cult status. It has already been nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in several categories. Readers who have worked in the sex trade will recognize the author's metaphorical world, and readers who have never gone there can find enlightenment in this book.

Melanie Baker says

Uhh... something about the importance of memory and having a past. And magical hookers.

Terence says

[*Sub Rosa* is a novel about maturity. Sub Rosa, the fairy-tale street where the Glories live and work, is a sex worker's Utopia: All the johns pay and pay well, there are no STDs (or disease in general), there's

Karlyflower *The Vampire Ninja, Luminescent Monster & Wendigo Nerd Goddess of Canada (according to The Hulk)* says

My musings on *Sub Rosa* by Amber Dawn.

First off, I'll start this review of sorts by saying that I have a wide assortment of styles and genres of books that I read - and enjoy - but the lifestyle of prostitution has never been a reading interest of mine. Upon looking up the title of my October book club novel I was apprehensive. I worried that Ms. Dawn would play the sex too heavy handed and wig me out. Although this novel has a number of failings, that was not one of them for me.

A quick note here, if you like linear stories that you come away from feeling satisfied with the way everything wrapped up in the end, this is most definitely not the story for you. There are many inconsistencies within the story that are never really explained but, in my opinion, this didn't take away from the overall impression of the book.

As a happy surprise, I really enjoyed this novel. The characters were, for the most part, lovable and unique.

In the world of Sub Rosa, prostitutes are known as "Glories", pimps are more frequently called "Daddies" and johns are referred to as "Live ones". There is an elegance within Sub Rosa that is hard for the reader to ignore. Starkly contrasted to that elegance is the sinister feeling associated with the Dark (A pit of blackness found at the end of the street, where girls have to earn their dowries in order to become Glories).

Inconsistent as this novel is, I would recommend it for anyone who enjoyed the world within *Memoirs of a*

Geisha. Be warned, though, there will be magic and supernatural elements :)

PhebeAnn Wolframe-Smith says

I devoured this one and would definitely read it again. An engrossing urban fantasy tale with a truly unique and imaginative setting. I loved its explorations of the role of memory in shaping who we are, and all of the quirky characters. At points the plot got sidetracked and the denouement happened perhaps too suddenly and ambiguously, after a long enticing build up to something that one expected to be a bit more tangible. It's one of those books that gives you more questions than answers. The way the plot is structured and the pacing is reminiscent of a mystery novel, so it is a little disappointing that we never find out the meaning of some of the "clues" we're given along the way. Nevertheless, I give it five stars for pure imaginativeness and enjoyability. The politics of sex work are nuanced in the novel, but if you have an aversion to reading about sex work this is probably not the book for you. I agree with others this book also needed better copy-editing, as it had a bevy of typos and grammatical errors.

Shannon says

With a sharp pen, fierce intellect and ferocious take on sex, sex work and sexuality, Amber Dawn's first novel *Sub Rosa* is a page-turner. Some books take on humanity, others merely relay a story. Dawn's *Sub Rosa* does both and is explosive.

With a brashness akin to Michelle Tea, Dawn explores sexuality, sensuality and subtlety. In moments protagonist Little lingers with innocent fragility, while in others she's overthrown by a sinister force that threatens to overwhelm her. Part pornography, part pulp fiction, *Sub Rosa* could be a darker, perhaps more twisted, compliment to Ann Bannon's famous lesbian chronicles. It's a modern-day musing on the roots of desire.

cj says

What can I say, this book blows me away on so many levels.

Juliandra says

Lisa nominated this book for L&L book club for September reading. I am really pleased that both Cyril and I read this book - I love sharing things with him!

I felt like I've been in *Sub Rosa* at times in my life before... not really like *deja vu*, but like it was reading a memory so stuffed away that I couldn't stop sneezing when it was brought back to the fore-front of my mind. The World that is *Sub Rosa* is reminiscent of places like Sin City and the memories I have of engaging in that "scene". I feel, however, that I have been in "the Dark" way more often than I have visited *Sub Rosa*. I love Little and I love that, like me, she chose to face and life in reality. A reality where I am surrounded by those I love and by those who I allow and who I believe love me too. Who's to say that there isn't dark corners in reality though? The Gods know I still visit those corners! :)

What a beautifully bizarre read. It was over far too soon, it seemed. A page-turner and over, for me, in 3 days. I love how Amber Dawn ignited by imagination in this novel!
4.5 stars out of 5 for me!

---- Yours Truly ----
Capital J.

Veronica says

I've never read such a accurate seeming depiction of sex work, and the urban fantasy side of this is top notch. I wish it had had a more compelling ending, but maybe I just read it too fast.

M. says

this book is magic. stunningly inventive, a pleasure to read. you think it's a clearcut fable about sex work but it quickly becomes its own idiosyncratic world, an unstable phantasmagoria irreducible to allegory.

Brittany Elina says

It's hard for me to find words to describe this book, it's narrator, and her journey without foraying into the realm of cliché, or defining it by a process of deferral - ie. telling you not what it is but what it isn't.

The way I describe it to people when I know they won't read it and feel like startling them is, "It's a story about magical prostitutes." But that's an oversimplification. This is a story about growing up, a magic realist savior story, a post-feminist magical realist tale of fluid identity and sexuality. I hate when people use the word "gritty" to describe a book, because it's usually not true, but this is a story that manages to be truly gritty without sacrificing language for shock value. It is romantic in the way that pushing your lover out of the way of a speeding train is romantic, deep and tragic and without frills.

"Little" is the protagonist of this story. She is someone who has never been special until she becomes so, someone who has only been average-looking until she is touched by the magic of another place. The world she lived in, our world, was dingy and the world of Sub Rosa has the bright, hyper-real feeling of early technicolor, which only makes the Dark at it's borders more menacing.

Read it.
