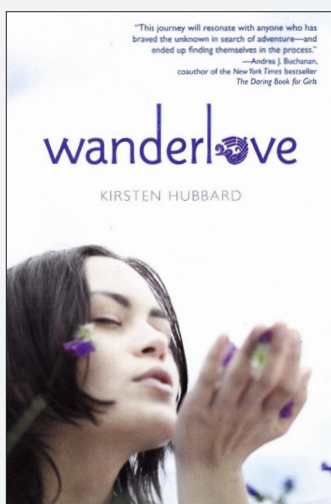


## Second Reaction: Armchair Tourism: *Wanderlove* Takes Teens on a Tour of Central America

Hubbard, Kirsten. *Wanderlove*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2012.

*Dallas Woodburn*



The title of Kristin Hubbard's novel *Wanderlove* is a riff off the term wanderlust, which is commonly defined as a strong desire to travel or wander. The term "wanderlove" comes from two of the book's main characters, Starling and Rowan, 20-something travel junkies who accompany our 18-year-old narrator, Bria, on her journey through Central America. "'Wanderlust is like itchy feet,' Starling explains. 'It's when you can't settle down. But Wanderlove is much deeper than that . . . it's a compulsion. It's the difference between lust and love'" (Hubbard 72). This idea of wanderlove—a deep passion, an unshakeable impulse that stems from the inner self—permeates the entire novel. It comes to encapsulate more than travel; by the end of Bria's journey, wanderlove has become a philosophy, a way of life.

Based on the reading level and subject matter, I pegged *Wanderlove* as best suited for a high school audience. Our narrator, Bria, has just graduated high school and has a great deal of autonomy; her parents are virtually absent from the book. Bria initially signed up to travel through Central America as part of a tour group, but within a couple days she leaves the supervised tour group to travel with Rowan and Starling, two young people she has just met. Throughout the book there are references to sex, drugs, alcohol, thievery, smuggling, and abusive relationships, and Bria, while underage, does become intoxicated at one point. I decided to share this book with two high school students: an

incoming junior and an incoming senior. Both are young women who I have taught in creative writing workshops and one-on-one guided writing mentorships. We corresponded about the book via telephone and email.

*Wanderlove* is written in first person from Bria's perspective, and I thought Hubbard did a terrific job at authentically capturing the voice, thoughts, and insecurities of a teenage girl. My teen readers agreed. "Bria reminded me of myself," one of them wrote. "The moments when she feels awkward or embarrassed made me feel close to her."

The other reader did not empathize with Bria much at the beginning, but grew to like her as the book progressed: "She kind of annoyed me at first. I thought she was kind of whiney. But by the end, she felt like my friend, and I was sad to say goodbye to her."

I was also curious to hear what my young readers thought about Hubbard's writing style. *Wanderlove* is written in the present tense with snippets of memory interwoven throughout, which I thought gave it the feeling of a personal travel journal. I surmised that teens would be drawn in by the intimate tone and casual prose style—within the first few pages, Bria felt, to me, like a real person, because her voice is so specific and nuanced. Bria makes lists throughout the novel—the first list comes on the first page. "That list immediately drew me in," one reader noted. "It seemed realistic and I could relate to it. I make lists and doodle a lot myself."

To me, reading *Wanderlove* did not feel so much like reading a novel as it did like pouring over the pages of a friend's secret diary. This sense is reinforced by the italicized sections of prose and the dozens of pen-and-ink sketches that decorate the pages, meant to be excerpts from the journal Bria is keeping throughout her trip. "I loved the drawings!" one of my readers exclaimed. "I would flip through the pages looking for the drawings even before I got to that part of the book."

The sketches are mentioned in the text itself, as we follow the re-ignition of Bria's love for drawing and art, and I think they lend another layer of authenticity to the story. (Fittingly, Hubbard is an artist, as well as a writer, and she did all the drawings.)

Finally, I asked my young readers about the book's theme. What were they left with when they closed the cover and set the book down? Surprisingly, neither mentioned travel. One responded, "*Wanderlove* is about being brave and taking risks." The other wrote, "Letting go of fears and prejudices, opening your heart, and seizing opportunities with both hands." Hubbard expertly uses the vehicle of travel to introduce teen readers to new cultures and experiences, while also touching upon themes and experiences they will encounter in their everyday, homegrown lives. *Wanderlove* is a multilayered, multi-textured book that will capture teenagers' attention and hold their interest throughout all 335 pages.

### About the Author

**Dallas Woodburn** is the author of two collections of short stories and editor of *Dancing With the Pen*: a collection of today's best youth writing. Her short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Dzanc Books "Best of the Web" anthology, and has appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *The Nashville Review*, *Arcadia Journal*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, and *Flashquake*, among others. Her nonfiction has been published in *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer*, *Family Circle*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, and her plays have been produced in Los Angeles and New York City. She is currently an M.F.A. candidate in Fiction Writing at Purdue University, where she serves as Fiction Editor of *Sycamore Review*. Visit her online at <http://dallaswoodburn.blogspot.com/>.