

Finding Normal

Jen Doktorski

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Laden with symbolism, Jen Doktorski's heartrending novel *Finding Normal* follows two teenagers with disordered eating on a cross-country road trip.

Gemma is sick of living on the hospital's eating disorder floor. Forced to do group therapy and choke down high-calorie snacks, all Gemma wants is normalcy. When a fellow patient, Lucas, offers to bust them both out of the hospital, she agrees. They set off on a road trip to visit all the towns in the United States named Normal and maybe find a new normal of their own.

Gemma is a brilliant narrator, equal parts witty, raw, and resilient. She sees symbolism everywhere, and the prose reflects her poetic bent. In one scene, Gemma marvels that Lucas's presence awakens something fragile inside her, "like hummingbird eggs inside a thimble." In another, she reflects on the "effortlessness" of pushing the "normal" setting button, perched between "delicate" and "heavy duty," on a dryer. This motif of normalcy weaves throughout—a consistent thread tying together alternating moments of humor and heartbreak.

The plot is driven by Lucas and Gemma's travels—both their literal trips to the various Normals and their symbolic progression toward mutual love and acceptance. Lucas is a winsome companion who softens Gemma's edges. Their chemistry culminates in an intimate shower scene as Gemma at last lets herself be seen. And an orphaned baby raccoon picked up along the way is an outlet for Gemma to offer the care she withholds from herself. A near tragedy toward the story's end propels Gemma to seek help and reconnect with her father. The resolution is triumphant without minimizing the ongoing challenges of recovery.

Two teenagers diagnosed with eating disorders guide each other toward healing and acceptance in the splendid novel *Finding Normal*.

VIVIAN TURNBULL (January / February 2025)

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