

The Case for Brandi Belden

William Brinn

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A proud woman who was a child star is the last to understand the wounds her industry inflicted on her in the complex, haunting novel *The Case for Brandi Belden*.

A former child star grapples with the fallout from her past in William Brinn's gripping novel *The Case for Brandi Belden*.

Brandi is no novice to the entertainment industry. A model and actor since childhood, she knows how to handle herself in front of the camera. Still, all it takes is a few minutes with a notorious talk show host to get her to divulge an explosive secret: When she was just fourteen, she had a sexual relationship with her adult boyfriend. Despite the opinions of others, Brandi maintains that the relationship was not a big deal. Nonetheless, her revelation threatens to unravel her once peaceful life.

Brandi's complexities make her a compelling, infuriating heroine. Ambitious as a girl, she internalized adult praise related to her "maturity" and professionalism. She came to believe that she had more control than she truly did. As an adult, she is wary; she also holds grudges over others' perceived flaws while excusing her own bad behavior. Indeed, Brandi's thought processes are sometimes inconsistent: She hates being relegated to roles that show off her body but expresses "delight" when one role allows her to wear skimpy clothing. As a tragic consequence of her unusual life, she is unable to accept unpleasant realities. Even after a shocking, agonizing development, she refuses to face plain truths.

The fateful interview and flashbacks to Brandi's career are narrated with some redundancy, as with Brandi and her interviewer repeating gestures. Excerpts from the scripts of Brandi's most famous shows help to highlight the parallels between her real life and her characters' troubles. The fallout from the interview consumes much of the book; it seems mild at first, but it snowballs toward an unpredictable catastrophe.

Like a script, the prose has a removed quality, relaying people's actions and situations at a distance and at the expense of close, relevant details about their surroundings and feelings. The difficult subject matter lends itself to emotional and troubling moments, such as when the media responds to Brandi's revelation or when Brandi repeats her parents' mistakes while trying to help her daughter cope with bullying. These moments coalesce into a dark exploration of how sexual abuse and lack of communication can ripple across generations.

The Case for Brandi Belden is a disturbing novel about the consequences of normalizing the sexualization of young girls and the media's complicity in their victimization.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 5, 2024)

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