

★ Underneath

Lily Hoang

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A girl tells the story of how her mother killed her in Lily Hoang's novel *Underneath*.

Arlene was only eleven when her mother, Martha, having already killed Arlene's younger siblings, suffocated her in her own bed. Though Martha was sentenced to prison, Arlene endures her own type of punishment: an eternity in a place unknown, left to ponder her fate and the woman who orchestrated it. Her family's history is one of cyclical grief and pain that escalates beyond what anyone could have imagined.

Arlene's voice is both childlike and world weary. Her narration transforms an already chilling story into a wrenching examination of generational abuse. Martha suffered at her mother's hands, and then passed that suffering on to her own children.

Martha's story is horrifying on several levels. As a childhood victim of fatphobic bullying and abuse, she becomes petulant, vengeful, and convinced that no one could ever hurt more than she does—qualities that follow her into adulthood and into a string of terrible relationships. Martha cares only for Martha, and that drives her to actions that ordinary mothers would find unthinkable.

Arlene's feelings for her mother are a surprising mix: despite her understandable anguish, she retains a hint of tenderness for the woman she calls "monster." And yet the book's most heartbreaking element is how preventable it all seems in retrospect. There are so many moments when something could have changed Martha for the better—or at least stopped her from killing again. Perhaps, as Arlene speculates, everything that happened was inevitable. And perhaps it doesn't matter anyway: Arlene is dead and always will be, and Martha will always be her murderer.

Inspired by true events, *Underneath* is a haunting novel about the making of a serial killer.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2021)

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