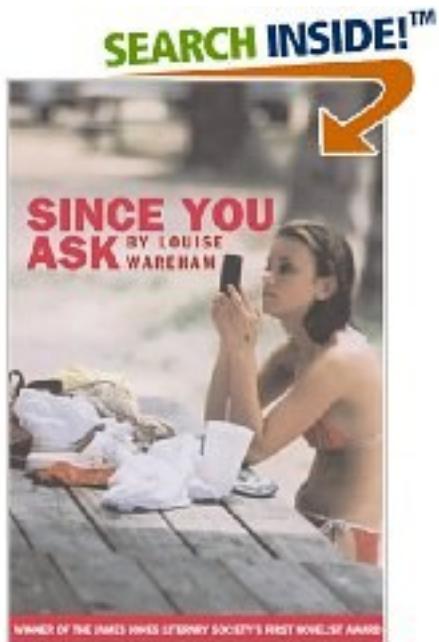


Since You Ask



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Louise Wareham's first novel, *Since You Ask*, speaks out of a tradition of fragile women poetically captured, of women both idealized and in trouble, caught in some version of a downward spiral. Wareham echoes Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and *Lolita*, and works with subjects more often found in memoirs of depression and mental illness. There is room, however, for a novel like *Since You Ask*, because it is earnest and beautiful, because the voice at its center shimmers with truth.

Betsy Scott has a wealthy and successful family, an exotic Antiguan background, a privileged private school existence. She's surrounded by rich friends, lush New York penthouses, silk, perfume, yachts and riding boots. Telling her story from within a Connecticut mental hospital, Betsy makes it clear that these rich trappings are mere

gloss. At sixteen she has an affair with her boyfriend's 41 year-old boss; in her early twenties develops drug addictions spurred on by her older brother Raymond; throughout she teeters on the edges of health and sanity, unsure of every facet of her identity. Though long keeping it secret from her friends and family, Betsy early on reveals to the reader that Raymond molested her at age nine; the resulting conflicting feelings affect her every other interaction.

Such a story of secrets, dysfunction and self-destruction could easily degenerate into cliché. The characters surrounding Betsy are undeveloped, as if pulled from a pool of stock types. With the central events laid out for the reader from the beginning, the novel lacks narrative pull. It is Betsy and her own feelings that are the focus of the novel, however, and it is her voice that saves it. She feels 'fragmented' and 'broken'; Wareham's writing replicates these inner conflicts and emotions nicely, through the skips between paragraphs and time periods, the adding on of bits and pieces as the novel progresses. Descriptions that are sense- and color-driven, lyrical, soft, and reminiscing offset the darkness of the situations, adding to the complexity and giving us a clearer picture of the many factors involved in Betsy's personality.

Some quirks of Wareham's writing style do become repetitive - an overuse of certain metaphors, the very similar description for every character, an awkwardness of flow especially in the first pages - but these are admirable attempts at creating a voice for her character. The repetition creates a consistency, a smoothness of speech that holds the novel together.

Such factors make *Since You Ask* an easy read. Wareham's writing is uncomplicated, spare, perhaps even unsophisticated. These qualities do not work to dismiss its merit, but rather suit its purpose. Wareham has not set out to write a jarring emotional ride, an exposé of personality and family dysfunction; she does not aim for cheap shock. Her style, slow and quiet as it is, makes for a book quickly read because it is compelling. Wareham's Betsy is perceptively and sensitively drawn. The descriptions are often beautiful, and the emotions feel solid and true to the situation. Despite its faults - and in some cases, perhaps because of them - Wareham's novel has succeeded. This is a strong and promising debut.

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