

KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

SKIN OF TATTOOS

Christina Hoag
Manuscript

BOOK REVIEW

Hoag tells the story of a gang member's attempts to flee his life of crime in this debut novel.

After 26 months in prison, 20-year-old Magdaleno "Mags" Argueta knows he can't go back to his previous life as a member of the Cyco Lokos, one of Los Angeles' most notorious Salvadoran street gangs. He's hoping his time served will earn him veteran status, allowing him to walk away without repercussions. Unfortunately, his crew is now under the command of his chief rival, Rico, who's less than sympathetic to his aspirations to go straight. What's more, the only jobs available to a tattooed ex-con like Mags are demeaning, such as passing out fliers on the sidewalk while dressed as a clown. At home, his family relationships remain strained: his mother sees him as a disappointment, his father as a source of shame, and his fireman brother makes him look irresponsible by comparison. His sister, Lissy, still treats him with affection, but he's heard rumors that she's hooked up with a member of a rival gang. Despite his pledges to stay out of trouble, Mags finds that no one believes he's up to the task. His parole officer tells him, "The life's not going to let you go so easy." As hard as that is to hear, Mags knows that it might be the truth. Hoag is a talented writer, summoning Mags' world on the page with remarkable empathy and detail: "The sidewalks were crammed like a giant flea market—people selling jeans, pots and pans, plastic bags of mango slices....Everything looked familiar and strange at the same time, old and new, I belonged and I didn't." Despite a story that feels a bit well-trod, none of the characters seem hastily constructed or come off as clichés. Their pressures and motivations are clearly stated and genuinely felt, and readers will quickly become invested in Mags and his confrontation with an uncertain future. A sense of melodrama flares toward the end as events start to feel less realistic and a little more heightened and Hollywood-ish. But the overall experience is surprisingly nuanced and wholly enjoyable.

A well-crafted, engaging novel about an ex-con trying to break free.

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