

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Kate Elizabeth Russell was born and raised in eastern Maine. She holds an MFA from Indiana University and a PhD from the University of Kansas. *My Dark Vanessa* is her debut novel.

- [Author's website](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What is your impression of Strane? How do you interpret Vanessa's attraction to him? Do you consider him an "evil" or "sick" character?
2. At the start of her second year at The Browick School, Vanessa is lonely and withdrawn. How does this make her susceptible to Strane's advances? Do you think her seclusion contributes to the reasons Strane is drawn to her?
3. Vanessa is underage when she first has sex with Strane, but believes that she consented and wanted his attentions. Where do you see the line that separates consent and rape in this situation? If Vanessa had been 18 at the start of their relationship, would this change your perception?
4. Discuss psychological grooming and its techniques. Do you feel you have a stronger understanding of this issue after reading the novel? What specific examples of grooming would you cite in Strane's behavior toward Vanessa?

5. Do you think that Vanessa was the first student Strane pursued in this manner? If so, why or why not?
6. Besides her seclusion, why do you think Strane singles out Vanessa? Does any of his behavior provide insights into his decision-making process?
7. Strane tells Vanessa, "It's just my luck that when I finally find my soulmate, she's fifteen years old." How do you interpret Strane expressing moral conflict over Vanessa's youth and concern for her future? Do you think he truly knows that he is doing something wrong, or is only worried about the potential consequences?
8. How do you perceive Vanessa's relationship with Jenny? Do you think things might have played out differently if Jenny hadn't started dating?
9. We move back and forth in time between Vanessa's teenage years and her present. How does Vanessa change throughout the years, or not change? What does this signify about the lasting effects of her relationship with Strane?
10. What do you think is the fundamental difference between Vanessa and Taylor and the way they respond to Strane's advances? Do you consider their respective responses to be products of shifting cultural mores, or different upbringings, or something else?
11. Do you consider Vanessa a reliable narrator? How do you think the novel would have read differently if it were told from another character's point of view?
12. Strane says, "We're living in a different time," referring to the change in attitude toward power imbalances in relationships. How far do you think society has progressed from even 10 years ago? How do you think Vanessa's story would have changed if she had been a teenager in present day?
13. How much do you think Vanessa's mother suspected about her daughter's relationship before the school becomes involved? How do you interpret her response after she sees evidence of Vanessa's relationship with Strane?
14. What do you make of Strane and Vanessa's interpretations of Vladimir Nabokov? How do their references to his work change as their relationship progresses?
15. Vanessa muses, "Looking like a Lolita and knowing exactly what I wanted...I wonder how much victimhood they'd be willing to grant a girl like me." How does appearance and behavior factor into our interpretations of consent, victimhood and agency?
16. How has social media shaped the way we respond to news about harassment and abuse allegations? How does the cacophony of responses help or hinder all parties involved in the case, or even others who find themselves in similar situations?

17. MY DARK VANESSA is a work of fiction, but there are many parallels to the real world. How has this novel affected your understandings of victimhood, agency and consent? Do you consider Vanessa a victim --- and why or why not?

- <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/my-dark-vanessa/guide>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

In the year 2000, high-school sophomore Vanessa returns to her Maine boarding school, Browick, still deflated from last year's falling-out with her best friend. Encouraged to pick up an extracurricular activity, she joins the creative-writing club helmed by her English teacher, Mr. Strane. Soon he is just Strane, a fortysomething man who compliments her poems and the color of her hair, introduces her to Lolita and Poe's "Annabel Lee," and touches her knee when no one's looking. She falls for him, hard. In the other time line in Russell's debut, it's 2017, Vanessa is working in a hotel, and a younger Browick alum has just publicly accused Strane of sexual misconduct while she was a student. A bomb dropped halfway through the novel impacts both story lines significantly. Narrating in present tense, Vanessa is easy to sympathize with, and her story is hard to stop reading. On another level, Russell realistically portrays how this sort of thing could happen—Strane's diabolical manipulation, Vanessa's confused love—even as Vanessa can't see it or understand how it hurts her. Empathetic, incendiary, and discussable. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: With dozens of international rights sold and a massive publicity campaign, this is being touted as a defining novel of the #MeToo era. -- Annie Bostrom (Reviewed 11/1/2019) (Booklist, vol 116, number 5, p36).

### Publisher's Weekly

/\* Starred Review \*/ Russell offers readers an introspective narrative that fully captures the complexity and necessity of the #MeToo movement in her powerful debut. In the year 2000, Vanessa Wye is a lonely sophomore at Maine's Browick boarding school. The academically gifted 15-year-old professes not to mind her solitude, especially when her 42-year-old English teacher, Jacob Strane, begins to pay attention to her, remarking on her red hair and fashion sense, and lending her some of his favorite books—including Nabokov's *Lolita*. Almost before Vanessa realizes what's happening, the two have embarked on a sexual relationship, and Vanessa is convinced she's been singled out as someone truly special—until, under threat of exposure, their relationship begins to go off the rails. Seventeen years later, Vanessa is still occasionally in contact with Jacob, but their relationship has grown tense, as another former student has gone public about his inappropriate advances. Russell's novel, alternating between past and present, presents a damning indictment of sexual predation, as she starkly elucidates the ways in which abuse robbed Vanessa not only of her childhood but also of her own once-promising future. It also prompts readers to interrogate their own assumptions about victimhood, consent, and agency. This is a frighteningly sharp debut. Agent: Hillary Jacobson, ICM Partners. (Jan.) --Staff (Reviewed 09/16/2019) (Publishers Weekly, vol 266, issue 37, p).

### Library Journal

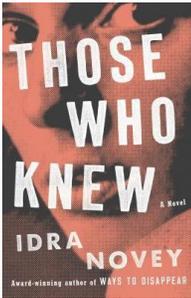
*/\* Starred Review \*/* DEBUT At age 15, Vanessa had a relationship with her 42-year-old English teacher, Jacob Strane, who claims to love her for her emotional intelligence and creative writing abilities. At least that's what she tells us nearly two decades later, when another student has called out Strane for their sexual activity and starts a social media firestorm. It also starts Vanessa thinking. She had always believed that she and Strane shared true love and defends him now against this student's so-called lies, but what really happened? Vanessa must decide whether she was a victim or willing participant, which of course raises the question of how willing you can be at age 15 in an unequal power relationship. As Vanessa slowly unpacks what happened, we see her youthful and ongoing denial, the impact of events on her still unsure self, how sedulous Strane was in drawing her in, how unabashed he remains, how much she needed and still needs to believe they had something special, and how she still takes Strane as a measure. VERDICT A deeply relevant debut that the author has been writing since age 16, drawing on her own experiences, and the reading enlightens even as it chills. [See Prepub Alert, 7/1/19.] --Donna Bettencourt (Reviewed 09/01/2019) (Library Journal, vol 144, issue 8, p69).

### Kirkus Reviews

*/\* Starred Review \*/* The #MeToo movement forces a struggling young woman to confront the abusive relationship that defines her sexual and romantic past. At 15, Vanessa Wye falls for her English teacher at Browick, a private boarding school. Jacob Strane is 42, "big, broad, and so tall that his shoulders hunch as though his body wants to apologize for taking up so much space." Strane woos Vanessa with Nabokov's novels, Plath's poetry, and furtive caresses in his back office. "I think we're very similar, Nessa," Strane tells her during a one-on-one conference. "I can tell from the way you write that you're a dark romantic like me." Soon, Vanessa is reveling in her newfound power of attraction, pursuing sleepovers at Strane's house, and conducting what she feels is a secret affair right under the noses of the administration. More than 15 years later, at the height of the #MeToo movement, Taylor Birch, another young woman from Browick, publicly accuses Strane of sexual abuse. When a young journalist reaches out to Vanessa to corroborate Taylor's story, Vanessa's world begins to unravel. "Because even if I sometimes use the word abuse to describe certain things that were done to me, in someone else's mouth the word turns ugly and absolute....It swallows me and all the times I wanted it, begged for it," Vanessa tells herself. Russell weaves Vanessa's memories of high school together with the social media-saturated callout culture of the present moment, as Vanessa struggles to determine whether the love story she has told about herself is, in fact, a tragedy of unthinkable proportions. Russell's debut is a rich psychological study of the aftermath of abuse, and her novel asks readers both to take Vanessa's assertions of agency at face value and to determine the real, psychological harm perpetrated against her by an abusive adult. What emerges is a devastating cultural portrait of enablement and the harm we allow young women to shoulder. "The excuses we make for them are outrageous," Vanessa concludes about abusive men, "but they're nothing compared with the ones we make for ourselves." A gut-wrenching debut. (Kirkus Reviews, September 1, 2019).

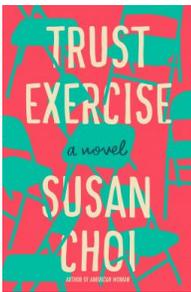
## READALIKES

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### ***Those Who Knew* by Idra Novey**

From the award-winning author of *Ways to Disappear*, a taut, timely novel about what a powerful politician thinks he can get away with and the group of misfits who finally bring him down.



### ***Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi**

Falling in love while attending a competitive 1980s performing arts high school, David and Sarah rise through the ranks before the realities of their family dynamics and economic statuses trigger a spiral that impacts their adult lives.



### ***His Favorites* by Kate Walbert**

Vulnerable young women are targeted, and abused, by trusted male teachers and left to deal with the devastation as adults