

Runaway Girl: Escaping Life on the Streets, One Helping Hand at a Time

By Carissa Phelps with Larkin Warren

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Reviewed by:

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Carissa Phelps wrote *Runaway Girl*, which is a chronicle of her life from her preteen years into adulthood. Phelps's story is gripping, which makes the book difficult to put down. Her writing style makes the book a relatively quick read; however, the topics she covers will stay with readers long after the book is completed.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is difficult to read at times, as readers learn of Phelps's challenging youth. Phelps opens the book in Chapter 1 by describing her family's impoverished lifestyle. Phelps's early childhood was filled with messages about God, which she enjoyed and referenced throughout her lifetime. Amid the good, there were some negative aspects to her life. At one point, her stepfather attempted to pay her older sister to have sex with him. This event, along with a few others, caused Phelps to move in with her biological father, but they had a distant relationship, and she eventually moved back in with her mother, always praying her stepfather would leave.

Chapter 2 discusses Phelps's life in junior high, which was characterized by her struggle to find a fit. She fell in with a group of friends that skipped school and used alcohol or drugs. It was only a matter of time before Phelps was exhibiting the same behaviors. In addition, Phelps began to run away from home for days at a time, and during one these times away, she lost her virginity at the age of 12. Her mother took her to juvenile hall because she felt she could no longer take care of Phelps, but Phelps ran away from the juvenile system. Out on the streets, Phelps met a prostitute and pimp that she began to work with, trading sex for money.

Throughout Chapter 3, Phelps worked with Icey, the pimp she met in Chapter 2. She engaged in sex to get money and drugs for him. She felt he owned her, and there were some graphic scenes in which Icey raped Phelps to exhibit his power. Eventually, Icey was arrested and sentenced to prison. Chapter 4 was the first time Phelps was referred to as a "prostitute" by a friend, and she felt everything that had happened to her was her fault. Phelps was sent to another juvenile home after recovering from some health problems related to her rapes. She ran away occasionally, but she also began attending school and rekindled her relationship with her mother and grandmother. Phelps still felt lost and ran in to trouble with the police. Her record of running away and crime led to her being in a pilot program for a rehabilitation school for girls. This time, Phelps continually prayed and thanked God for helping her find a new place.

Chapter 5 chronicles Phelps's life at Wakefield, the rehabilitation school. She was hesitant to talk about her past, but began meeting with Ron, a counselor, and she opened up over time. Ron had her write her story, and she felt like someone cared enough to listen to what she had to say. He believed in Phelps and told her she had the potential to be great. At Wakefield, Phelps also met Mrs. W., her math teacher. Mrs. W. noticed Phelps was gifted in math and gave her resources to teach herself algebra. Her mother visited her often in Wakefield and Phelps wanted her to notice that she was now "good." Her self-esteem skyrocketed during this time, and she was released back to her mother and grandmother at the end of eight months. At the start of Chapter 6, Phelps was working

hard to continue her positive streak, but she began to struggle to fit in at school, and after some time, she resumed running away to use drugs and alcohol. Phelps felt a void inside of her, and she attempted suicide at 14. When Ron found out, he told her suicide was never an option, and while Phelps was still hurting, she knew she would never attempt to take her life again.

Phelps moved to Florida to live with her dad in Chapter 7, but things were not going well, as she skipped school and endured another rape. Phelps moved back to California and began attending Cambridge Alternative High School. Cambridge offered dual enrollment, and while Phelps was behind in some subjects, her teacher's aide, Barbara, encouraged her to make the best of the situation and push herself. Chapter 8 described Phelps's strong relationship with Barbara, who had an upper-class background and lifestyle. Barbara opened her home to Phelps. Phelps would do her homework there and eat dinner, and Barbara even invited her to move in, which Phelps declined. Despite this positive influence, Phelps still was doing drugs and cutting classes. Throughout this time, Barbara kept pushing her because she never wanted Phelps to feel unsafe or alone. Phelps graduated on time from Cambridge and was ready to move on to college, the next step in her journey.

In Part 2, readers will read about many successes and failures, during which there is no choice but to cheer for Phelps. Chapter 9 begins with Phelps at a community college and getting ready to go to the University of California at Berkeley; however, at Berkeley, she discovered she wanted to change majors, which caused her to stop out and attend community college for prerequisites. During this time, she met Jake, and they began a serious relationship. Phelps attended Fresno State and graduated with a 4.0 in her major. She applied to UCLA's law school, but began having serious health problems, likely caused by her rape and exploitation. Her relationship was strained while her health waivered, but nonetheless, Jake proposed, and Phelps felt happier than she ever had. Chapter 10 describes the first time Phelps realized she needed to have a mentor to help guide her through law school. Her mentor had a similar story to her own, which helped her feel a bit more "normal." Her health continued to be a problem, and her relationship with Jake came to an end during this time as he learned the details of her past. Phelps turned to Barbara for comfort, and Barbara told her to begin again.

Finally, Part 3 inspires readers as they learn of Phelps's successes. Phelps decided to pursue an MBA during Chapter 11, and she found another mentor to help her. Additionally, she was approached to make a documentary about her life. She went back to a former juvenile hall to begin filming. When administrators found out she was coming, they asked her to speak at a fundraiser, and Phelps requested to speak to the young girls in the facility first. This was her first time talking to youths with backgrounds like hers, and she would continue doing speaking engagements in the future. In Chapter 12, Phelps met and helped more young women, but she found she had to get used to just helping these girls with no strings attached, as her time in their lives was often short. She also graduated from UCLA law and saw her finished documentary. The film experience helped her begin to find peace with her past.

Phelps took a six-figure salary after she finished her MBA and law degree, but she realized in Chapter 13 that something was not quite right. She became consumed with the idea of doing something to help young girls avoid repeating what had happened in her life, as this was something she felt fulfilled in doing. In time, she got a call from an organization designed to help troubled youth, which she felt was just what she needed. Phelps prayed to God that things would continue to be okay in her life. As she talked to youth across the country, she was confronted with the idea of forgiveness, and realized she had to first come to terms with her own anger before she could forgive anyone.

In the epilogue, Phelps said she survived, and she saw value in her suffering. Phelps also pointed out that exploitation happens all over the country and offered resources for those that want to help. She learned a lot from her tumultuous life about trusting God, loving herself, loving others, and forgiving.

Overall, this book would be a good fit for a common reading book; however, there are a few areas of concern that should be mentioned. First, the rapes described in the book can be quite graphic, which may be challenging to read for any student, particularly those that have been affected by this type of act. It is encouraging to see how Phelps worked through her attacks, but nonetheless, it could affect students. If the book is used, a university should work with a counseling center to be sure students are adequately supported. Additionally, a lot of expletive language is used early in the book, which may or may not be appropriate for all colleges and universities. The subject matter can be difficult at times; however, it is a well-written book that forces readers to think critically and reflect.

In terms of points for discussion, I feel this book has several. Initially, the book lends itself well to discussions of poverty and inequality. Phelps lives in poverty through much of the book, and she also works hard in the end of the book to find solutions to help her struggling community. Schools that have a strong focus on social justice may also have an easy time integrating this book and poverty into day-to-day conversations. Another discussion topic could be the types of schools Phelps attended in the book, as these schools are a newer approach to justice and reformation than what had previously existed. Additionally, the underlying theme of faith may be a good starting point for discussion. A religiously-affiliated school may have a good climate to talk about the role faith can play throughout one's life, but a secular university or college may also be able to have good conversation surrounding spirituality and faith, as this is a part of many students' identities. A final discussion could be centered on perseverance toward an end-goal. To Phelps, a law degree was extremely important, and she stopped at nothing to achieve this goal. This is similar to a lot of college students and their goals, which could make them excited to talk about persistence in the context of the book.

While using this book on campus, there are a few partnerships or programs that could be beneficial. First, having the author on campus would allow students to hear a firsthand account of her life, but if that would not be possible, schools could also show the documentary about her life. Either of these options allows students to connect even more with the material they read. Also, if faculty members have areas of expertise discussed in the book, for example sex trafficking, there could be a lecture series for students. Familiar faces talking about challenging topics may make students more likely to open up discussion forums. If a required freshman seminar course exists, the book should also be woven into the everyday fabric of the classroom. These courses could even take the book outside of the classroom in the form of community service projects, designed to help students see topics in the book through experiential learning. There are several resources in the back of the book that may be useful if a university or college decides to create service opportunities in conjunction with the text.

Although the challenges are different in many ways, the journey of Phelps and a college student could be similar. Both have or will experience many ups and downs over an extended period of time. College students will need to ask for the help of others, just as Phelps did, to get through some of these times. Finally, many millennial students want to give back to society just as Phelps has done since completing law school. I would recommend this book for use in the college environment, as it is a story that pushes boundaries but also offers students and staff an opportunity for growth.