Magic for Liars blends magic school with a murder mystery

Magic school clashes with a murder mystery in *Magic for Liars,* the debut novel from Sarah Gailey, best known for their *American Hippo* short stories — but with one key twist.

That's because while the school and the murder may be magical, Ivy Gamble, the investigator hired to solve the case, is completely ordinary. Unable to sling a spell or cast a charm, she's a far more relatable character than most other magical detectives that dot the literary landscape.

Spoilers for the book ahead.

Image: Tor.com

When we first meet Ivy, she's eking out a living in Oakland tracking down cheating husbands, dodging muggers on her doorstep, and drinking her way through the local bar scene. Then she's offered the chance to solve a murder: Sylvia Capley, the health and wellness teacher at the Osthorne Academy, was found split in two in the library, and the headmaster wants to hire Ivy to find out who did it.

There are two problems, though: that the Osthrone Academy is a Hogwarts-esque magical school full of teenagers with supernatural powers that add a whole host of possibilities to the case; and that Ivy's estranged twin sister — who, unlike Ivy, does have magical powers and whom Ivy has spent the last few years avoiding — is a faculty member there.

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Magical schools are a staple of the fantasy genre, from J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts and Lev Grossman's Brakebills to Terry Prachett's Unseen University. *Magic for Liars* introduces

readers to yet another school of spellcraft: The Osthorne Academy of Young Mages, set in a world very much like ours with magic just bubbling under the surface.

But Gailey's school, more than nearly any other magical institution, *feels* like a high school. Students graffiti the walls, cheat on homework, and text too much in class. There are mean cliques and pregnancy scares and all the other problems that are all too often lacking in magical schools, giving it a familiar framework to relate to.

We see all this through Ivy's eyes, who like many of the grown-up *Harry Potter* fans that *Magic for Liars* is geared towards, has spent her entire life wishing for the kind of magic abilities that her twin sister Tabitha has and that Ivy lacks. But as *Magic for Liars* makes clear, some problems are just fundamental to human nature, and no amount of magic can solve those on its own.

Gailey's debut novel seamlessly blends two genres together
Despite the genre trappings, it's the relationship between Ivy and Tabitha that drives the story forward. In a sense, it's the novel's second mystery, unraveling what went wrong between the two sisters and what (if anything) can set things right.

Gailey's debut novel seamlessly blends two genres together, imbuing noir-like mystery with the fun of a more traditional magical adventure that's taking place along the edges.And Gailey's worldbuilding clearly establishes a much larger world (something that they established themselves as particularly proficient at in their *American Hippo* novellas.)

Ultimately, *Magic for Liars* is a great debut for Gailey, with fun characters, an interesting mystery to unravel, and a unique spin on the magical noir genre. And while Gailey hasn't announced plans for a sequel, we won't have long to wait for more from them: their next novella, , is out in February.

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