*New To Liberty* by DeMisty D. Bellinger rev by. Madison Harris

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DeMisty D. Bellinger is a professor of creative writing at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts and has published two poetry books within the last five years. Her newest book, *New to Liberty*,is her third book to be published and her first novel. Alongside her writing, Bellinger works as a poetry editor at Malarkey Books as well as an alumni reader at *Prairie Schooner*. She also has her own website where one can find more information about her, her events, and other works of fiction and non-fiction that she has created.

*New to Liberty* is a novel that entails three different stories of three women ranging from 1933 to 1966. The women all narrate their experiences which include them navigating the circumstances of their time as well as their unique obstacles within their romantic relations. The first to share her story is Sissily who is a young woman of color dating a much older white man. Next is Nella, a young black girl who recently moved to a small town in Kansas and finds herself falling for an older disabled white man that she has to hide from the world. Lastly, the novel ends with Greta who is a white woman telling her story of growing up in the thick of the great depression and dust bowl crisis in Kansas while trying to navigate being in love with a married woman in her neighborhood. These all seem like very different stories and perspectives but under closer observation, you realize how each connects to the other in some way or another, as each story is building and establishing the world around them.

Though *New to Liberty* deals with sensitive topics of assault (both physical and sexual) as well as racism it establishes an emotional tension for the audience. Bellinger depicts these scenes truthfully and in an emotionally raw almost haunting way, they are also extremely vivid. She does make the traumatic aspects to be something that happens to the characters rather than something that defines them. Bellinger creates flawed and naive female characters that truly shine in their story arcs despite their weaknesses or situations. The nativity is illustrated through the girls' lack of romantic knowledge as they are all within a relationship of this degree. These stories are far from idealistic romances but that doesn’t take away from their appeal rather it adds a refreshing element of seeing something new being displayed. I believe that the novel has ample potential in being a conversation starter on the topic of young women and the tendency for them to fall into relationships with significant age gaps early on that impact their romantic perception. This is best illustrated in how Sissily's arch ends and Bellinger goes about illustrating the emotional tax that Sissily’s relationship with Ezzy entailed:

“ … I was grieving the self that was leaving me. I was losing who I thought I was for too long. I looked at Ezzy to gauge his mood, but I couldn’t tell anything. All I saw was a middle-aged man who was no longer appealing.”

The way that all of these relationships are displayed is very problematic which I believe to be initial as they are not healthy relationships. They all are in some way portrayals of dumb first loves that ultimately teach some lessons to the girls.

The novel as a whole is a very simple and fascinating read, something I would recommend if you want a quick novel to read that is focused on women and their stories. I would warn about how there are some instances of graphic and detailed retailing of traumatic events the girls are subjected to that may be hard for some to read - though it can be skipped and little is missed information-wise. Some of these events deal with sexual assault, assault, child neglect, and abusive relations are heavy topics that are covered extensively within the novel. Bellinger does a fascinating job of creating characters that you can root for and want better for them in life.