

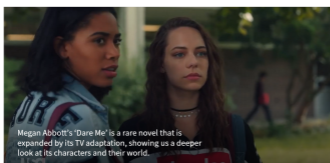
## FEATURES

## Megan Abbott's 'Dare Me' TV Adaptation Highlights a Dark and Complex Side of Femininity



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Megan Abbott's 'Dare Me' is a rare novel that is expanded by its TV adaptation, showing us a deeper look at its characters and their world.



Megan Abbott has a skill for writing about bodies. About the impossible things they do, their beauty, their flaws, and the ways they're used against other people. Here enters *Dare Me*, a novel about athletes and their genius. It's also a noir and contemplates gender roles, how they bound and constrict women, and the many ways in which women love and hate each other.

The TV series, adapted by Abbott herself and Gina Fattore (*UnREAL*), is a faithful translation of the story, filling out gaps and providing a fuller picture than the one painted in the novel.

When writing, Abbott employs striking visuals and tone to create an unsettling mood, making her novel an intelligent fit for a television adaptation. An expert on hard-boiled fiction and film noir, Abbott employs this knowledge of classic film in her writing, taking the traditionally masculine genre and infusing it with femininity.

Like most noirs, *Dare Me* relies on the perspective of an unreliable narrator, frequently using flashbacks to build up dread and tint the story with a hint of danger. The narration of Addy, our protagonist, is ethereal and dreamlike, introducing readers and viewers to the world of cheerleading and the mindset of young girls.

**“At first, cheer was something to fill my days, all our days. Ages fourteen to eighteen, a girl needs something to kill all that time, that endless itchy waiting, every hour, every day for something — anything — to begin. ‘There’s something dangerous about the boredom of teenage girls.’”**

Playing further with the rules of film noir, Abbott takes the role of the femme fatale and splits it into two characters.



*Dare Me* kicks off with the arrival of Collette French, the high school's new cheer coach. Before that, the cheer squad used to be run by Beth, Addy's borderline sociopathic best friend, who is naturally talented yet lacks the drive that characterizes Addy. Collette quickly changes the way things are run in the cheer squad, pinching the fat of her cheerleaders and emotionally bullying them to a place of transformation. The story unravels in a small town, putting an emphasis on the many bad things that can happen to the young women that live there, how adults are viewed as stuck. Teens living there can only find escape via small moments of greatness, like sticking a landing in cheer or joining the army and getting the chance to leave it all behind. Gender roles play an important part in *Dare Me*, with the main characters suffering greatly due to the limits of their roles and their inability to fulfill them. When describing motherhood, Addy narrates what Collette feels: "She told him the way she felt after Caitlin was born, like the secret of life, had been told to her at last and the secret was this: in the end, all the things you think matter are just disappointment and noise."

As soon as Collette arrives, Addy grows obsessed with her, an infatuation that straddles the line between sexual and aspirational. Simultaneously, Beth grows jealous of this relationship. Having different motivations, both girls try their best to understand Collette's life, stalking her and visualizing her life, with the coach representing the possibilities and pitfalls of the adult world. They soon discover that Collette is cheating on her husband with Will, one of the marines stationed in the school. Addy is drawn into their relationship, using this knowledge to get closer to Collette and facilitating meetups between Collette and Will, while Beth plots and waits, with her anger and hate building up with seemingly no outlet.

*Dare Me* is a vividly and beautifully narrated novel. When discussing a crime scene and the face of a man that was shot, Abbott describes his mouth as a "red flower, its tendrils sprawling to all corners and, like a poppy, an inky whorl at the center." She describes a tooth as a "button or spool of thread."

While these beautiful descriptions are lost when translated to TV, Abbott and Fattore try their hardest to make the transition seamless, providing gorgeous visuals and striking performances that feel as if you were reading Abbott's sharp writing. The TV series expands on the novel's focus, giving equal time to the three women at the center of it, with one episode producing a great example of perspective and how one event can be drastically different depending on personal experience. Abbott's fingerprints are all over the series, from the closely filmed shots of muscles rippling and stretching to several uses of teeth that make the viewer squirm. While the novel has the feel and read of a hardboiled noir, the show allows itself to find inspiration in other sources, like *Friday Night Lights* in the way in which sport unites a community and how much influence instructors have over their students. *Dare Me* highlights the danger and vulnerability of teens, how much they depend on the adults that surround them in order to learn what's right and wrong.



One of the show's most inspiring directions is in the way they take the character of Beth; in the novel, she's enigmatic and mysterious, made even more so since we're bound to Addy's perspective. She's described as witchy, dark, with a shark-like smile and oracle-like intuition. Abbott describes one of Beth's dreams as follows: "As long as I've known her, Beth has had periodic dreams of dark portent, like the night before her aunt Lou fell from her second-floor landing and broke her neck. In her dream, her aunt came to breakfast and announced she had a new talent. Then, taking one forearm to her neck, she showed them how she could turn her head 360 degrees." The show allows us to inhabit Beth's space more fully, showing us a clearer picture of her psyche and world. We understand why Beth acts the way she acts from the beginning, even if her actions are difficult to swallow. Her dreams are amongst the best sequences of the show, resulting in dread-inducing and Lynchian shots.

The genius of *Dare Me*, both the novel and the show, lies in its attention to detail, whether that's the passion and blurred lines of female friendships or in the close and respectful look it gives to high school hierarchies and women. There's a hint of danger and indiscretion in every interaction characters make, from one girl applying makeup to the other, to an inappropriate sleepover between teacher and student, to hushed conversations in school hallways, to death-defying stunts. It's Abbott's skill that reminds us that gore and danger are closer than what we're comfortable with.

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