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Driving by Starlight

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As a Saudi Arabian woman, Leena experiences many restrictions. She has a rebellious spirit, but her government is strict, and rebellion doesn’t just mean expulsion from school. Sometimes, it could even lead to arrest. It is Leena’s senior year of high school and, though she is comfortable with taking risks, she knows that if she has any hope for a freer life, she can’t get in too much trouble. It is difficult for Leena to show any submission when her own father is a rebel and symbol of the resistance, though he has been locked up since Leena was little. Leena continues to study with the goal of going to school and eventually challenging the strict laws that bind her, but also explores her own forbidden desires: spending time with boys, wearing immodest clothing, and speaking her mind. As Leena tries to determine which are ridiculous rules and which are true sins, she needs the support of friends who will help her see truth and aid her in becoming her best self.

Driving by Starlight offers perspective into issues that American readers may have little experience with, but the narrative is difficult to follow without a previous knowledge of the culture. For example, though a glossary is included in the back of the book with Arabic words and their translations, many of the Arabic words that are used in the book are not included in the glossary. The meaning can sometimes be gleaned by context, but this is not always the case. Also, further cultural background would be helpful during the exposition section of the book. The plot development is a bit clumsy. Events in the story seem disjointed, but not in an intentional way. Leena has several different relationships that change through the novel, but the character development is weak, so a reader is not sure what to expect of any given character, as every character’s behavior seems unexpected and out of character. Consequently, it is very difficult to keep track of the characters and the role each plays in Leena’s life.

*Contains moderate sexual content and mild violence.