

Once Was Lost

Sara Zarr

Reviewed by: Sophia Cheng, Age 16

Star Teen Book Reviewer of *Be the Star You Are!* Charity

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Sam's world is crumbling around her, with each passing day as yet another opportunity to encounter more misfortunes. Beginning with her mother's accident that lands her in a rehabilitation center, the resulting strained relationship between her and her father and constant reminders that her life has embraced a bleaker side have taken their toll on Sam. Where there is once a strong belief in the tiny miracles of life is a dwindling pocket of hope and happiness. Sam is desperately grasping onto the remnants of her faith, but truthfully, she is tired of trying, of making a sincere effort to maintain a strong image of herself. Ironically, her father, the much-beloved town pastor and inspirational figure in the people's lives, embodies the strength of faith in the town. However, in Sam's case, his wise advice and proverbial phrases do not seem to factor into reality.

When thirteen year-old Jody Shaw is pronounced missing, Sam cannot help but question herself, her beliefs, and most importantly, the possibility of a miracle. Just when her self-doubt resurfaces with a resounding force, Sam cannot find anything familiar to cling to; the only person she yearns to see is being treated for drinking problems. Only bittersweet memories centered around the times when her family was still united remain, and not even her religion can keep her solidly anchored anymore. Her close friends and other member of the Church community sense the shift in Sam, but it is only through Jody's brother Nick and spending time with her mom that triggers a positive change within her. Perhaps those miracles that happened so often in the stories she grows up surrounded by will prove themselves to be more than relics from the past, and a symbol of hope in the present and into the future.

In *Once was Lost* by Sara Zarr, Samora Taylor reflects the turmoil of an adolescent struggling with her own identity while maturing and asserting her independence, all while capturing the essence of a small, tight-knit community within a realistic story. The book is sectioned off by days like a diary and told from Sam's perspective, the bolded newspaper experts following Jody's kidnap case gives the book a journalistic aspect. However, not much thought is put into creating a mystery as perhaps a side plot, and therefore it moves through the story like a passing scene. In addition, the characters themselves have are well-developed, and their feelings really shine through the accuracy of the reactions. Even though religion is a key theme in this story, it is mainly used to establish Sam's character and is integral to the nature of the town. As a result, the heavy incorporation of religion does not make the story sound too moralistic or preachy. On the downside, there is a small romantic incident that attempts to bring excitement to the plot, but it feels like a random scene used to complete Sam's teenager image. Also, near the end of the book, the plot starts to show a pattern, and Sam's actions become all too predictable. Fortunately, this issue is resolved with an ending that secures the main themes of faith, love, and family.

Due to the content of the plot, and the main issue it circles, *Once was Lost* is probably geared towards high school, but the way it addresses the teenage years makes it fitting for this age group as well. It is a comforting book, but to be warned, there is a pretty gloomy mood that overlays the bulk of the story. Books I would recommend reading after this one include: *North of Beautiful* by Justina Chen, *Uglies* by Scott Westerfield, *Criss Cross* by Lynne Rae Perkins, and *The Dairy of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank.