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# What We Saw



## Synopsis

Critically acclaimed memoirist Aaron Hartzler, author of *Rapture Practice*, takes an unflinching look at what happens to a small town when some of its residents commit a terrible crime. This honest, authentic debut novel—inspired by the events in the Steubenville rape case—will resonate with readers who've ever walked that razor-thin line between guilt and innocence that so often gets blurred, one hundred and forty characters at a time. The party at John Doone's last Saturday night is a bit of a blur. Kate Weston can piece together most of the details: Stacey Stallard handing her shots, Ben Cody taking her keys and getting her home early. . . . But when a picture of Stacey passed out over Deacon Mills's shoulder appears online the next morning, Kate suspects she doesn't have all the details. When Stacey levels charges against four of Kate's classmates, the whole town erupts into controversy. Facts that can't be ignored begin to surface, and every answer Kate finds leads back to the same questions: Who witnessed what happened to Stacey? And what responsibility do they have to speak up about what they saw? National Book Award finalist Deb Caletti calls *What We Saw* "a smart, sensitive, and gripping story about the courage it takes to do what's right."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Be prepared to feel a lot of anger when reading this. And also very visceral reactions: a sick feeling in your stomach, tightening in your chest, pulsating heart beat...this book is powerful. I honestly don't think my review will do it justice. Inspired by true events (ones so shocking and disgusting I can remember where I was when I first heard the news), Hartzler takes a courageous risk and looks deeply into our society's rape culture. Taking place in small town Iowa where high school basketball reigns and the players are treated like gods, a fellow student accuses four players of sexually assaulting her when she was drunk at a party. Multiple questions arise- is being unable to say no the same as consenting (NO); does a victim "ask" for it or "have it coming" simply for the way they dress or the way they act (NO); what is society's obligation to the accused and more importantly to the victim? In an interesting take, our MC is neither the victim nor the accused; rather, she is a bystander and fellow student who is plagued with unease and questions about what really happened and how her community is responding to it. Kate's inner turmoil over the situation has her seeking for answers while also feeling hesitant about learning the truth. The decisions Kate is faced with and the way she responds is admirable, brave, and courageous. For a book about the rape of a girl, Stacey, the victim herself is actually rarely present in the story. Her name and character are degraded, and she is continuously dehumanized, but we never really see her or hear her. I can't help but think this is intentional on the author's part. So many times in rape cases (and many other crimes), the victim is discarded or pushed aside. It becomes all about the suspect, his (or her) life, how he is effected, how his life will change. Or it becomes about the community and the effect it has on them (like losing your star basketball players). Somewhere along the way the victim, the whole reason why we should care, is forgotten or disbarred, just as what happens here to Stacey. *What We Saw* is a harrowing novel that sadly hits too close to reality. But hopefully it serves as a reminder that this happens- it is real, it is tragic, and it requires accountability and action be taken.

If you are only going to read one young adult book in your life, then that novel should be *What We Saw* by Aaron Hartzler. This is a book that matters. This is a novel that is real life at its darkest but also at its most hopeful when one person is willing to speak up when others are not. *What We Saw* is a story that has the power to change how people think and it needs to be on every person's and every school's reading list. *What We Saw* is written in first person from Kate Weston's point of view. A junior with a promising future ahead of her, she, along with several of her classmates attend a

party at one of their classmates' home when his parents are out of town. After downing a few too many shots of tequila, her longtime friend Ben Cody makes sure she gets home safely and then he returns to the party to retrieve his car. The next day, social media (esp. Twitter) blows up with tweets, comments and pictures from the night before. One of the pictures going around is one taken of Stacey Stallard and she is drunk, passed out and slung over the shoulder of one of the school's popular basketball players. By Monday morning, whispers about Stacey begin and before the week is over, four popular basketball players will be charged with sexual assault. What really happened that night might have remained a mystery, a case of "he said, she said", if not for Kate Weston. Kate does not like how everyone is trashing Stacey's reputation and she does not like the fact that no one seems interested in knowing what really happened to Stacey. Kate wants to know the truth and she is willing to go against her parents and her friends to uncover it. Sadly, *What We Saw* is a fictionalized account of an actual case that happened in 2012. Aaron Hartzler's portrayal of this case is remarkably true to life and it is sometimes incredibly hard to read, let alone fathom. The storyline challenges society's kneejerk reaction to place the blame on the victim and it also challenges many biased beliefs that a woman is "asking" to be raped because of flirtatious behavior, the way she dresses or drinking a little too much. Various discussions offer a thoughtful commentary on what constitutes consent and more importantly, these conversations make it clear that the inability to say no is not an implied yes. A well written, thought-provoking young novel that I highly recommend to readers of all ages.

What happened at that party at Dooney's that Saturday night? Junior Kate Weston doesn't know. She got drunk early and her friend Ben Cody took her home. She didn't even see any texts or hear anything about it until Monday. She was busy visiting her old friend Ben who has somehow gone from being her best friend when they are five, to someone who went his separate way for several years, to being a boy who could be a boyfriend. When Stacey Stallard is absent on Monday, Kate wonders because she spent some time with her at the party. Then the rumors started, something happened that involved some of the members of the basketball team - the State-bound basketball team. Ben is a star on the team and is depending on getting noticed by college scouts for his way out of this small, economically-depressed Iowa town. When four of the players are arrested and charged with sexual assault of a minor and dissemination of child pornography, the town become polarized. The principal and basketball coach stand up for these upstanding young men from good families. Some of the students think that the way Stacey dressed and acted made the rape her fault. Kate wanted to know the truth but she was afraid to ask the boy she was coming to love, and

who loved her, what he knew about that night. The kids, the school and the town all chose sides. No one who was at the party would come forward to tell what they saw. Then the news of a video surfaced. Despite a number of people trying to make sure that all copies were deleted, Kate saw the video and decided that she had to tell what she saw no matter what or who it would cost her. This is a very timely story that will give thoughtful readers lots to ponder. It is a story that needs to be told and Hartzler did an excellent job of showing the ways various people reacted.

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