Dare Me—Cheerleaders and Homicides

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Dare Me, the recently released Netflix original series, is a little, dark compound of re-invented symbols and stereotypes of the American popular culture. The show is based on the eponymous thriller novel by Megan Abbott (2004), dealing with a group of high school cheerleaders who get involved in a series of controversial intrigues after the new Coach, Colette French (Willa Fitzgerald), takes over the team. Until that moment, the girls were trained and captained by one of their teammates, Beth (Marlo Kelly), who clearly did not appreciate the power shift in the team and developed an antagonism toward the new leader. Thus, the two main characters of the series are Colette and Beth, joined by Beth’s best friend, Addy (Herizen Guardiola); the latter managed to become the Coach’s new pupil not solely because of her talent, but mostly because she got hold of one of Colette’s dark secrets, paving her way to become her accomplice by hiding it.

The show is an enjoyable teen drama with dark traits that provides both moments of high tension and teenage frivolousness. Although it might look like yet another show about high school and homicides, it also proposes a new vision of some classic popular tv archetypes, in particularly related with cheerleading and American social roles. Those viewers who are familiar with teen dramas set in high schools, will also probably know that cheerleaders and football players represented as the elite of the

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school social hierarchy are a must. In the case of *Dare Me*, we find an interesting portrayal of both.

The cheerleading activity, for instance, is not just a hobby allowing girls to wear their uniform at school every day; more realistically it is represented as a full-fledged sport which requires total commitment and can lead to formative credits and college scholarships. In fact, for Coach French and her team the cheering on the field side is a secondary activity, aiming to support the football team and entertain the public during the breaks. Their real goal is to pass the selection for the regional cheerleading competition in order, one day, to get to the national championship.

Even the way they are depicted is very different from other tv series: the girls are not always neat and pretty, they are often sweaty and unkempt, with their skin always full of bruises synonym of hard workouts. We see them jogging early in the morning even after a night of partying and fighting to keep a strict diet. This last challenge is brutally portrayed in a scene from Episode 2, where we see Addy and Beth “eating” some cookies: they chew the biscuits to taste them but spit them in a napkin to avoid the absorption of fats.

The viewer also acquires a deeper knowledge of the cheerleading roles: Beth is the top-girl or *flyer*, the one who stands at the top of the pyramid—a role for which it is required to be short, slim and very flexible—while Addy is a *base*, as her task is to hold the flyer and because of this she has to be stronger, taller and more resistance.

Ultimately, the show displays the dangers intrinsic to a sport full of stunts and acrobatic activities: in Episode 5, Tacy, Beth half-sister, decides to make a difficult *flyer* figure called “bow and arrow” without Coach French’s permission, and hits a teammate in the falling. RiRi, the girl hit by Tacy, suffers a serious facial trauma who causes her to lose almost every frontal tooth.

Contrarily to the cheerleaders, the football players are not popular, mainly because the team has been losing for some time. Therefore, the role of the haughty, popular boys—usually given to the players in other tv series—is here left to a group of Marines who attend the school hallways with the aim of recruiting new freshmen to join the army. Among these Marines, Sergeant Will will have a key role in revealing the true nature of Colette’s character, and in Addy’s involvement in the Coach’s dark behaviour.
Each episode starts with Addy’s reflections over some advice or teaching the Coach has given. This way, it’s immediately clear that Addy—breaking the fourth wall—is talking directly to the viewer from the future, already knowing what is going to happen while re-analizing some actions that led to specific consequences.

However, one episode in particular (again, Episode 5) gives the viewer the possibility to see a certain sequence of events also through Beth’s and Colette’s point of view. The difference can be seen in the different screen palettes and the slight changes in the dialogues: what has been indelibly remembered by one of them can be completely forgotten by one of the other two. Beth’s point of view, for example, is portrayed with dark and gloomy colors, representing her mood and thoughts after an alleged (the viewer has not seen it) sexual assault by one of the Marines. Moreover, her discontent for the close relationship born between Addy, whom she is clearly in love with, and Colette French. Despite the hollow tones, whenever Beth looks at Addy, she sees a flawless girl, perfect in every way. This is particularly evident in a scene where we know Addy should be covered in blood and messy, but through Beth’s eyes she has her make-up on point and her clothes are perfectly clean.

Addy’s dominant point of view also has a role in misleading the viewer from the manipulative dynamic created between the girl and the new Coach. In fact, it provides Beth with the archetypic role of the intolerably jealous friend who, at the end, will turn out to have been right all along.

Moreover, the character of Colette French opens a reflection over the stereotype of the perfect American woman. She is married to a businessman, although it is immediately clear that she is not in love with him. She has a successful career, but at the same time she manages to be a diligent housewife, taking care of their little daughter. Even her physical appearance is close to perfection: she is tall, blonde and beautiful, her hair and make-up are always on point, her outfit is elegant and appropriate in every occasion. All these attentions, as the viewer clearly notices throughout the series, are simple shields to hide a manipulative and rebellious temper, through mechanisms symbolized pretty well by the depiction of her smoking vice. Colette smokes every time she is nervous or under pressure; she even smokes in front of Addy and Beth when she has to convince them not to tell everyone what they have seen her doing in the woods, trying to create a connection with the two young girls and even offering
them cigarettes. However, during a formal dinner with her team-girls’ parents, when asked if it was a problem for her to eat in a non-smoking area, she answers with a smile that she doesn’t smoke and she considers it a terrible habit, protecting her image of healthy and virtuous sportive woman.

In conclusion, *Dare Me* is an intriguing teen drama and thriller with some classic, recognizable elements, but it is also sprinkled with innovative and noteworthy traits which make it one of the most interesting product among the new Netflix productions.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

*Dare Me*. 2020. Created by Megan Abbott & Gina Fattore. Produced by Dan Kaplow, Ariel Schrag, Jamie Rosengard.
