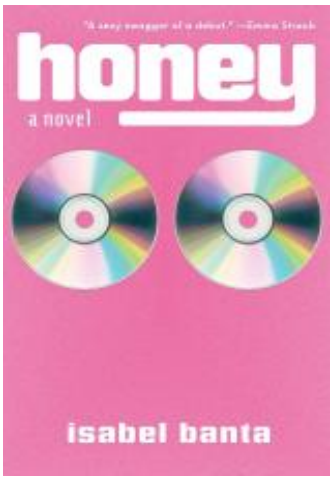
Honey

by Isabel Banta



About the Book

A coming-of-age story that follows the meteoric rise of singer Amber Young as she navigates fame in the late-'90s and early-2000s era of pop music superstardom.

It is 1997, and Amber Young has received a life-changing call. It?s a chance thousands of girls would die for: the opportunity to join girl group Cloud9 in Los Angeles and escape her small town. She quickly finds herself in the orbits of fellow rising stars Gwen Morris, a driven singer-dancer, and Wes Kingston, a member of the biggest boy band in the world, ETA.

As Amber embarks on her solo career and her fame intensifies, her rich interior life is frequently reduced. Surrounded by people who claim to love her but only wish to exploit her, and driven by a desire for recognition and success, for love and sex, for agency and connection, Amber comes of age at a time when the kaleidoscope of public opinion can distort everything and one mistake can shatter a career.

With the captivating style of Stephanie Danler?s SWEETBITTER and the raw honesty of Jennette McCurdy?s I'M GLAD MY MOM DIED, Isabel Banta?s debut novel, HONEY, redefines the narratives of some of the most famous pop icons of the ?90s and 2000s. It reimagines the superstars we idolized and hated, oversexualized and underestimated, and gives them the fresh, multifaceted story they deserve.

Discussion Guide

1. Did you grow up in the late ?90s/early 2000s? If so, what do you remember of pop music at that time? Did this book change your perspective of those celebrities and their careers?

2. How do you think Amber?s rise to pop stardom might have played out in the present day? What do you think is

responsible for the differences between that era of pop culture and today?

3. Early in the book, Amber wonders ?if two people can really be happy if there?s no one else to see it. If they can just exist together, truly happy.? Later she says she believes they can. Do you agree that this is possible in the current age of social media? What about in celebrity relationships?

4. As we follow Amber?s journey, she always seems to be reaching for something more. How did her definition of success, of ?making it,? change over the years? When do you believe she reached success, if at all?

5. Do you think Amber?s complicated family dynamics impacted her career choice and its trajectory?

6. How is Amber and Gwen?s friendship representative of girlhood, growing up and female friendships? Were you surprised that Amber and Gwen were so close --- almost like sisters --- when ?90s tabloids often portrayed female pop stars as enemies?

7. Amber?s image is built on derogatory terms that she says girls learn from their mothers. In what ways does this language damage young women? What are some examples of this in HONEY?

8. The initial distinction between Savannah, Gwen and Amber is based on their sexuality, and they are marketed using these differences. How did sexuality drive public opinion in HONEY?

9. How did the ?90s shape our perspective of sexuality now? Toward the end of the book, Amber finally gains artistic control in her songwriting and music production, but she recognizes that she is supported by older men like Pat and Sonny, who have benefited from her success. In what ways did they help and hurt Amber? Do you think her success would have been possible without the male gaze?

10. When thinking about her identity, Amber says, ?They are stacked inside my head, these paper girls, all patient, selfless, capable of restraint.? How does Amber create different versions of herself to share with others? When do you think she realizes and expresses her authentic self?

11. When recording with Amber, Axel shares, ?For most people...the art and being the fact of the art is interchangeable.? Do you agree with Axel? What are some examples of this? Does this only apply to certain kinds of people/artists/celebrities?

Author Bio

Isabel Banta is a writer, book publicist and indie bookseller based in Brooklyn. She graduated from the University of Virginia. HONEY is her debut novel.

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