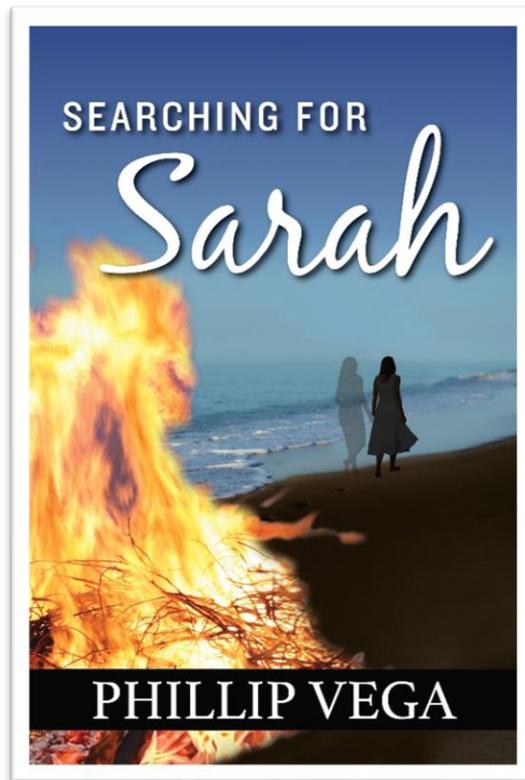




## “Book Review: *Searching for Sarah*”

*By Joelene Pynnonen*



### **Family secrets and love take center stage in this sharp social issue fiction**

Nina Ruiz has always been larger than life. The kind who goes after what she wants and succeeds even when the odds are stacked against her. But now she’s dead, and her brother is left to pick up the pieces.

On the reading of the will, he finds out that she has a long-term and dearly loved girlfriend named Sarah. Considering that he didn’t even know she was gay, this comes as quite the shock.



But Sarah is missing.

To find her, Tom will have to delve into Nina's diaries for clues. Through reading, he comes to understand the sister that he thought he knew, and to find that maybe there was a reason Nina couldn't tell him everything.

*Searching for Sarah* has a little mystery, a little social commentary and a little romance, but at heart, it's a story about family, the families that people are born into and the ones they find along the way. The relationships are what make this novel soar. They're littered with miscommunication, secrets, things left unsaid. In short, they're messy, but genuine.

Family is central to the story, but there is an emphasis on found family as well. The relationship between Tom's wife, Gabi, and Nina is understated, but powerful. Without it ever being said aloud, the women support and accept each other even more than some of the blood family relatives.

Told alternately from Tom and Nina's perspectives, *Searching for Sarah* dives into social prejudices against race, gender or sexual orientation. It does a good job of unpacking intersectional biases. Tom may understand the prejudice Nina faces as a brown-skinned Hispanic person, but his understanding doesn't extend to her experiences as a lesbian woman in a high-powered corporate job. Before reading her journals, he thinks of her as invincible. The reality is that in order to succeed in the life she has built, she has had to hide her vulnerabilities. The diaries are a gateway for Tom to understand the things Nina could never have told him.

While Tom's parts of the novel feel authentic, Nina's chapters would have benefitted from a good sensitivity reader. The depiction of lesbians and lesbian relationships is jarring and seems skewed toward a male viewpoint. The lesbians in this story are rife with aggressive jealousy, conquest sex, and the main relationship is built on carnal lust rather than emotion. If the characters weren't named, I'd assume these relationships to be heterosexual, and toxic at that. Aside from that, it also utilizes the "bury your gays" trope as central to the plot, so that could put LGBTQ+ readers off.



*Searching for Sarah* is a great exploration of so many facets of humanity. This slow-burn mystery is as engaging as it is thoughtful. Despite the missteps in Nina's chapters, the characters are a pleasure to spend time with. Following Tom's journey to understanding the consequences of his thoughtless remarks and Nina's journey to full self-acceptance is a treat.