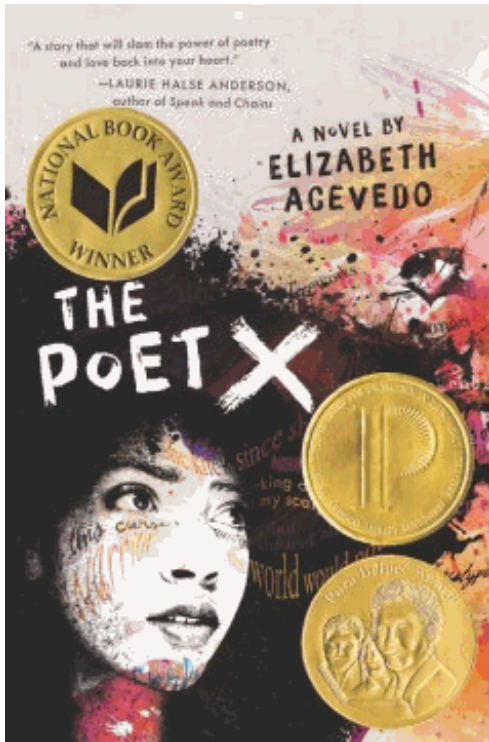


THE POET X



Young Adult

By Elizabeth Acevedo

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3 /5

Minor Restricted
BookLooks Review Rating

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4	<p>Shake my head as even the drug dealers posted up near the building smile more in the summer, their head scowls softening into glue-eyed stares in the direction of the girls in summer dresses and short shorts:</p> <p>"Ayo, Xiomara, you need to start wearing dresses like that!"</p> <p>"Shit, you'd be wifed up before going back to school."</p> <p>"Especially knowing you church girls are all freaks."</p>
5	<p>Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said was "a little too much body for such a young girl."</p> <p>I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips so that the boys who called me a whale in middle school now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.</p> <p>The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.</p> <p>When your body takes up more room than your voice you are always the target of well-aimed rumors, which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.</p>
14	<p>God It's not any one thing that makes me wonder about the capital G.O.D.</p> <p>About a holy trinity that don't include the mother. It's all the things.</p> <p>Just seems as I got older I began to really see the way that church treats a girl like me differently. Sometimes it feels all I'm worth is under my skirt and not between my ears.</p> <p>...Sometimes I feel my life would be easier if I didn't feel like such a debt to a God that don't really seem to be out here checking for me.</p>
19	<p>Your father will never touch rum again. He will stop hanging out at the bodega where the old men go to flirt.</p>
25	<p>Last year, during youth Bible study, he wasn't so strict. He talked to us in his soft West Indian accent, coaxing us toward the light. Or maybe I just didn't notice his strictness because the older kids were always telling jokes, or asking the important questions we really wanted to know the answers to:</p> <p>"Why should we wait for marriage?"</p> <p>"What if we want to smoke weed?"</p> <p>"Is masturbation a sin?"</p>
28	<p>X: You make out with any boys while you were in DR.?</p> <p>C: Girl, stop. Always talking about some boys.</p> <p>X: Well if you didn't kiss nobody, why you all red in the face?</p> <p>C: Xiomara, you know I didn't kiss no boy. Just like I know you didn't.</p> <p>X: Don't look at me like that. I'm not proud of the fact that I still ain't kiss nobody. It's a damn shame, we're almost sixteen.</p> <p>C : Don't say damn, Xiomara. And don't roll your eyes at me either. You won't even be sixteen until January.</p> <p>X: I'm just saying, I'm ready to Stop being a nun. Kiss a boy, shoot, I'm ready to creep with him behind a stairwell and let him feel me up.</p>
32	<p>And I get all this attention from guys but it's like a sancocho of emotions.</p> <p>This Stew of mixed-up ingredients: partly flattered they think I'm attractive, partly scared they're only interested in my ass and boobs, and a good measure of Mami-will-kill-me fear sprinkled on top.</p> <p>What if I like a boy too much and become addicted to sex like Iliana from Amsterdam Ave.?</p> <p>Three kids, no daddy around, and baby bibs instead of a diploma hanging on her wall.</p> <p>What if I like a boy too much and he breaks my heart, and I wind up angry and bitter like</p>

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	Mami, walking around always exclaiming how men ain't shit, even when my father and brother are in the same room?
35	This is the typical hood school, and not too long ago it was considered one of the worst in the city: gang fights in the morning and drug deals in the classroom.
39	<p>Mami put her hand out but didn't take them. Instead she backhanded me so quick she cut open my lip. "Good girls don't wear tampones. Are you still a virgin? Are you having relations?" I didn't know how to answer her, I could only cry. She shook her head and told me to skip church that day. Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros. That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young. That she would pray on my behalf. I didn't understand what she was saying. But I stopped crying. I licked at my split lip. I prayed for the bleeding to stop.</p>
42	I hear one of Mami's famous sayings in my ear, "Mira, muchacha, life ain't fair, that's why we have to earn our entrance into heaven."
43	As much of a science geek as he is, he doesn't question the Bible the way that I do.
46	<p>Today, I already had to curse a guy out for pulling on my bra strap, then shoved a senior into a locker for trying to whisper into my ear. "Big body joint," they say, "we know what girls like you want."</p>
51	<p>"Oh, is this your girl? That's a lot of body for someone as small as you to handle. I think she needs a man a little bigger." When I see his smirk, and his hand cupping his crotch, I break from Twin's grip, ignore Caridad's intake of breath, and take a step until I'm right in homeboy's face: "Homie, what makes you think you can 'handle' me, when you couldn't even handle the ball?"</p>
52	I shouldn't get so angry when boys—and sometimes grown-ass men—talk to me however they want, think they can grab themselves or rub against me or make all kinds of offers.
59	<p>When the only girl I'm supposed to be was an impregnated virgin who was probably scared shitless. ...When I look around the church and none of the depictions of angels or Jesus or Mary, not one of the disciples look like me: morenita and big and angry. When I'm told to have faith in the father the son in men and men are the first ones to make me feel so small. That's when I feel like a fake. Because I nod, and clap, and "Amén" and "Aleluya," all the while feeling like this house his house is no longer one I want to rent.</p>
62	That all the lit candles beckon like fingers that want to clutch around my throat. That I don't understand her God anymore.
64	<p>Papi was a mujeriego. That he would get drunk at the barbershop and touch the thigh of any woman who walked too close. They say his tongue was slick with compliments and his body was like a tambor with the skin stretched too tight. They say Papi was broken, that he couldn't get women pregnant, so he tossed his seeds to the wind, not caring where they landed. They say Twin and I saved him.</p>

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	That if it wasn't for us Mami would have kicked him to tomorrow or a jealous husband would have shanked him dead.
66	<p>When Communion time comes I stand in line with everyone else and when Father Sean places the Eucharist onto my tongue I walk away, kneel in my pew, and spit the wafer into my palm when I'm pretending to pray.</p> <p>I can feel the hot eyes of the Jesus statue watching me hide the wafer beneath the bench, where his holy body will now feed the mice.</p>
85	<p>A boy's face in my hands, but he's nearly a man.</p> <p>Memories of Mami's words almost lash my fingers away but still I brush upward, against the grain and prickle and bristle of a light beard at his jaw. His cheekbones rise like a sun; the large canvas of a forehead.</p> <p>A nose that takes space. 'This is a face that apologize for itself.</p> <p>The boy moves his body closer to mine and I can feel his hands drop down from my waist to my hips then brushing up toward these boobs I hate that I now push at him like an offering, his hands move so close, our faces move closer— and then my phone alarm rings, waking me up for school.</p> <p>In my dreams his is a mouth that knows more than curses and prayer.</p>
95	I've never smoked weed, but I think Aman does sometimes after school; I smell it on his sweater, and know the crowd he chills with.
97	I don't want a converted man-whore like my father so the whole block talks about my family and me.
118	And although I still want to stay seated during Communion, I get up every time, put the wafer in my mouth then slip it beneath the pew. My hands shaking less and less every time I do.
120	<p>"I Think the Story of Genesis Is Mad Stupid"</p> <p>"God made the Earth in seven days? Including humans, right? But in biology we learned dinosaurs existed on Earth for millions of years before other species . . . unless the seven days is a metaphor? But what about humans evolving from apes? Unless Adam's creation was a metaphor, too? And about this apple, how come God didn't explain why they couldn't eat it? He gave Eve curiosity but didn't expect her to use it? Unless the apple is a metaphor? Is the whole Bible a poem? What's not a metaphor? Did any of it actually happen?"</p>
130	<p>In bed at night my fingers search a heat I have no name for.</p> <p>Sliding into a center, finding a hidden core, or stem, or maybe the root.</p> <p>I'm learning to caress and breathe at the same time.</p> <p>How to be silent and feel something grow inside me.</p> <p>And when it all builds up, I sink into my mattress.</p> <p>I feel such release. Such a relief. I feel such a shame settle like a blanket covering me head to toe.</p> <p>To make myself feel this way is a dirty thing, right? Then why does it feel so good?</p>
140	<p>"You ever smoked a blunt?"</p> <p>I shake my head.</p> <p>"Word. Drake is better when you lit. But we can listen to him anyways."</p>
321	<p>"In Aman's arms I feel warm.</p> <p>In Aman I s arms I feel safe.</p> <p>In Aman's arms he apologized.</p> <p>In Aman's arms I apologize.</p>

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	<p>In Aman's arms I want to forget. In Aman's arms my mouth finds his. In Aman's arms my hands touch skin. In Aman's arms my shirt comes off. In Aman's arms I am shy for a moment. In Aman's arms I am beautiful beautiful beautiful. In Aman's arms I feel beautiful. In Aman's arms my jeans unsnap. In Aman's arms I show myself. In Aman's arms naked skin rubs against mine. In Aman's arms kisses and kisses. My neck and ear. In Aman's arms fingers touch my breasts. In Aman's arms I feel good. So good."</p>
145	<p>So I press my lips to his. His mouth is soft against mine. Gently, he bites my bottom lip. And then his tongue slides in my mouth. It's messier than I thought it'd be. He must notice, because his tongue slows down.</p>
146	<p>As much as boys and men have told me all of the things they would like to do to my body, this is the first time I've actually wanted some of those things done.</p>
148	<p>But I also shouldn't kiss a boy in the smoke park . . . and yet, I did that, too.</p>
149	<p>Because I didn't want to stop kissing. And we didn't. Until his hands moved under my shirt and I jumped at the chill. Maybe I jumped at something else. Guilt? How fast we're moving? I don't know, but I knew it was time to stop. But I didn't want to. I mean, I guess I did. It's confusing to know you shouldn't be doing something, that it might go too far, but still wanting to do it anyway. I don't whisper with Caridad, or make eye contact with anyone, or question Father Sean, or look at the cross bearing an all-knowing God who, if he exists, saw everything, everything that happened in the smoke park.</p>
151	<p>Okay. I know. It's not that deep to kiss a guy. It's just a kiss, some tongue, little kids kiss all the time, probably not with tongue (that'd be weird). Boys have wanted to kiss me since I was eleven, and back then I didn't want to kiss them.</p>
155	<p>I don't know what they would do if the person he brought home was not a girl.</p>
163	<p>Tug on the hem of Twin's Green Lantern tee (it fits tight around my boobs and shows some midriff. I'm glad Mami didn't ask to see what I had on under my jacket.)</p>
164	<p>This is a party crowd: the loudest, the boldest, the ones who smoke during the school day, and drink their parents' marijuana on the weekend. Someone hands me a cup of fruity drink but I put it down on the TV stand, lean against the wall.</p>
166	<p>Then his leg is between mine and we're dancing exactly the way people do in music videos.</p>

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	Like if they weren't wearing clothes they'd be . . . you know. I can feel all of him. Not as scrawny as I thought.
174	I look at the boy who gazes at Twin with love all over his face.
180	I've always found Nicki Minaj compelling. Although she gets a bad reputation for being "overly sexual" and making songs like "Anaconda," I think the persona she portrays in her videos is really different from who she is in real life. ... She is a woman in a male-dominated world making albums that go platinum. I know she's not considered most women's role model like Eleanor Roosevelt or Mother Teresa, or even Beyoncé, but I think she stands for girls who don't fit into society's cookie-cutter mold.
189	We never kiss so publicly but with his lips on mine I realize I want the same thing. ...And I know people are probably staring, probably thinking: "Horny high school kids can't keep their hands to themselves." But I don't care because when our lips meet for those three stops before I get off, it's beautiful and real and what I wanted.
191	Walking home from the train I can't help but think Aman's made a junkie out of me: begging for that hit eyes wide with hunger blood on fire licking the flesh waiting for the refresh of his mouth.
192	I mean, I did miss my stop because I didn't want to quit Aman's kisses. "Se lo estaba comiendo. Had her tongue down his throat. Some little, dirty boy. I had to get off the train a stop early." ...Mami's eyes were a fan and my make-out session on the train was the shit hitting it.
194	Trying to unhear my mother turn my kissing ugly, my father call me the names all the kids have called me since I grew breasts.
204	"This is why you want to go away for college so you can open your legs for any boy with a big enough smile. You think I came to this country for this? So you can carry a diploma in your belly but never a degree? Tu no vas a ser un maldito cuero."
205	"Cuero," she calls me to my face. The Dominican word for ho. This is what a cuero looks like: A regular girl. Pocket-less jeans that draw grown men's eyes. Long hair. A nose ring. A lip ring. A tongue ring. Extra earrings. Any ring but a diamond one on her left hand. Skirts. Shorts. Tank tops. Spaghetti straps. A cuero lets the world know she is hot. She can feel the sun. A spectacular girl. With too much ass. ...Hips that look like water waiting to be spilled into the hands of thirsty boys.
218	I'm so out of it the next morning as I put my things away in my locker that I don't notice the group of guys circling near until one bumps me, both his hands palming and squeezing my ass.
219	Pushing away from my locker, I face the dude who groped me, push him hard in the back.
231	"You cannot turn your back on God. I was on my journey to the convent, prepared to be his bride, when I married your father. I think it was punishment. God allowed me America but shackled me with a man addicted to women. It was punishment, to withhold children from me for so long until I questioned if anyone in this world would ever love me. But even business deals are promises. And we still married in a church. And so I never walked away from him although I tried my best to get back to my first love.

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	<p>And confirmation is the last step I can give you. But the child sins just like the parent. Because look at you, choosing this over the sacred. I don't know if you're more like your father or more like me."</p>
249	<p>These are boys from some of my classes, some even smoke with Aman. Sometimes the teacher on duty notices.</p>
295	<p>I got him an X-Men comic, issue 17. Although it's not his usual anime, Twin tears up when he sees it. Iceman, the main character in it, is a super-dope gay mutant.</p>
305	<p>She holds me off with the lit match, but I make another grab and the smoking book falls to the floor. We both reach for it and just as my fingers grace the cover, feel the etched woman on the leather, my mother slaps me back hard onto my ass. The Christmas bracelet rattles to the floor, but as I breathe near the door, my cheek stinging, all I can do is watch the pages burn.</p>
323	<p>In Aman's arms my mouth finds his. ...In Aman's arms my shirt comes off. ...In Aman's arms my jeans unsnap. In Aman's arms I show myself. In Aman's arms naked skin rubs against mine. In Aman's arms kisses and kisses. My neck and ear. In Aman's arms fingers touch my breasts. In Aman's arms I stop breathing. In Aman's arms I feel good. So good.</p>
326	<p>And I Also Know We have to stop. Because now we're lying on the couch and he's on top of me. And his kisses feel so good, everything feels so good. But I also feel him pressed against me. The part of him that's hard. That's still an unanswered question I don't have a response for. And when his hand brushes my thigh and then moves up— ...I stop his hand. I pull my face from his kiss. He is breathing hard. He is still kissing me hard. He is still bumping up against me. Hard. "We have to stop."</p>
356	<p>So it seems to me that when the Bible describes church as a place where two or more people discuss God, they don't mean just the cathedral-like churches. I don't know what, who, or where God is. But if everything is a metaphor, I think he or she is a comparison to us. I think we are all like or as God.</p>

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