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Outside Beauty

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This author's **Kira-Kira** won the USA's Newbery Medal, so expectations run high as you head into the opening chapter. There are four sisters - same mother, four different fathers. Mom is Japanese-American and since one of the fathers is also and the rest aren't, they're a mixed-race bunch; Marilyn is beautiful and plans to marry by the time she's 19 so she won't have to work; Lakey is bright and reads a lot; six-year-old Maddie is cute; Shelby isn't beautiful, bright or cute and tells the story. The girls regularly declare that they love each other to bits, maybe even more than they love their Mom. When we meet the family, they are barrelling down the highway westwards to California (to Father No. 3), escaping from Mom's latest boyfriend, last glimpsed in Chicago trying to break down the front door of the apartment. Mother's life-strategy is uncomplicated; do whatever it takes to please a man and then get him to give you what you want - a diamond necklace, perhaps. So when the car breaks down in Wyoming, Mom calls a young mechanic using her most flirtatious, manipulative voice?. He fixes the car and shortly afterwards, by way of payment, Mother -disappeared with the mechanic?.

Okay, then, so it's not **Little Women**. The girls' unusual life-style is disrupted when Mom is hospitalised after a car crash and the sisters are farmed out to their respective fathers. Separation is agonising, especially for little Maddie who lands up with a caricature of a strict school-teacher who knows everything there is to know about raising children. There are many runnings-away and gettings-caught but, you know, it all turns out fine in the end. Despite the traumas, Shelby's narrative is always pacey, even light-hearted, leaving a question as to whether she can make us care enough whether these sisters emerge happier, wiser or whatever.

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