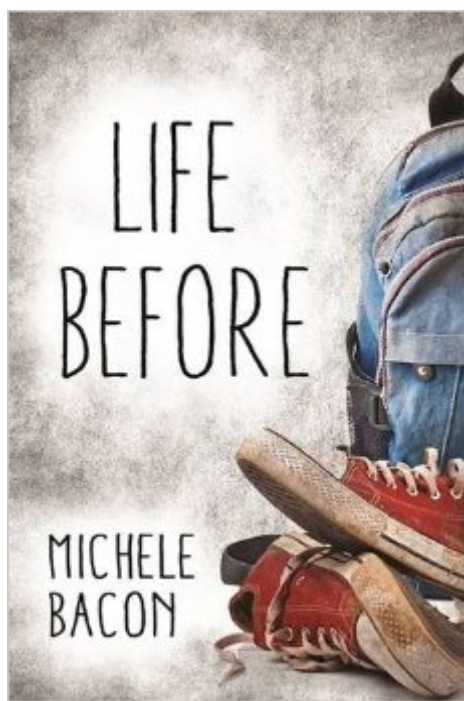


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# Life Before



## Synopsis

Seventeen years is a long time to keep secrets, and Xander Fife has gotten very good at it. Everyone believes he has a normal life and a normal family. If he can just get through this summer, he'll start his real life in college with a clean slate--no risk, no drama, no fear. Even better, his plans for summer are awesome: lots of pick-up soccer, relaxing afternoons with friends, and an epic road trip. Xander is banking on some long overdue nights with his ideal girlfriend, the amazing Gretchen Taylor. Instead of kicking off what had promised to be an amazing summer, however, graduation day brings terror. His family's secrets are thrust out into the open, and Xander must confront his greatest fear. And survive doing so. Armed with a fake ID, cash, and a knife, Xander skips town and assumes a new identity. Hundreds of miles from home and in danger, one thing is clear: Xander's real life is already in progress and just getting through it isn't enough. Fans of Ellen Hopkins's *Burned and Smoked*, as well as Matt de la Pena's *We Were Here* will be drawn to Michele Bacon's debut.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With *LIFE BEFORE*, Michele Bacon has created a thoughtful and stirring portrait of a boy forced to grow up practically overnight. When his dark past erupts into tragedy, Xander Fife must leave behind his friends, his hometown, and everything he knows, and go on the run; flinging himself headlong into what he first views as a terrible limbo - a meager and fugitive existence eked out in fits and starts as he waits for a dangerous situation to resolve itself - he soon discovers things about

life, and about himself, that he never knew before. Xander undergoes some very painful evolution over the course of this novel. He has a believably complex relationship with his mother - whom he both loves and sometimes resents - and a realistic (if sometimes unfair) attitude towards her failings as a protector during the years when the pair of them suffered domestic abuse at the hands of Gary, Xander's father. These are heavy and complicated subjects, and Bacon does a wonderful job of not trying to water them down or candy-coat them for easier digestion. Equally impressive is the way in which she shows how a boy who has learned too much too early about self-reliance can still be completely at sea when forced to fend entirely for himself. The friendships that Xander makes while in his self-imposed exile are developed beautifully, and each character he encounters feels whole, satisfying, and important. Based on the brief description of the novel, I think I expected the plot to be somewhat explosive, and was surprised to find that it was remarkably subtle instead - filled with small moments and quiet shifts in Xander's emotional journey that are movingly profound and life-changing. There's a lot of sadness here, but a lot of optimism as well, and I'm impressed by how well Bacon has balanced the two.

**LIFE BEFORE** by Michele Bacon This book has it all; adventure, suspense, drama, and a great deal of heart. In this modern coming of age story, 17-year-old Alexander (Zander) Fife is intent on graduating high school and going off to college so that his real life can finally "begin." Zander's violent, abusive father has his own plans, though. Zander finds himself on the run and on his own for the first time. Bacon does any amazing job navigating the emotional turmoil experienced by children who grow up in violent homes. Zander's guilt, embarrassment, and fear are palpable as are his hopes for a better life. You will find yourself pulling for Zander and all of the other children and teens with similar stories. Bravo!

This is a great book. Kids in abusive families are often forced to grow up before they should have to, but for Xander, the biggest change in his life comes in one harrowing moment. It's enough to make him give up everything, and watching that happen--reading this book--is really difficult at times. That's because his character is so well-drawn and realistic, as are the rest of the characters and the world around him. Xander has to figure out how to survive on his own, and the story of how he does that is really compelling.

An observant, emotional, and heartbreaking story of a boy trying to rise from the ashes of his past, only to be forced back into the life he doesn't want. Bacon is honest when describing the pain of

child abuse and the terror and survival skills needed to survive on the street. Xander is a compelling, beautifully drawn character and teens will devour this sometimes scary, but always deeply felt story about confronting your past and surviving the future.

Michele Bacon's contemporary young adult debut, *Life Before*, is a poignant journey of self discovery and ultimately, healing, for seventeen year old Xander Fife. With his high school graduation just days away, Xander is looking forward to this final summer with his friends before his real life begins. He and his best friend, Jill Bernard, are looking planning a road trip, he is dating his longtime crush, Gretchen Taylor and best of all, a scholarship to Tulane means he can leave his small hometown behind him once and for all. However, a chance encounter with his estranged father's new girlfriend sets in motion an unforeseen chain of events that ends in tragedy. In order to protect his friends, Xander decides to leave town until the threat is over, but the situation is not resolved as quickly as he thought it would be. Life on the run is not as easy as he assumed and Xander is soon dependent on the kindness of strangers until it is safe to return home. Xander is a likable character who is genuinely concerned for his friends' safety. His childhood was absolutely terrifying until his mom finally divorced his father and although they struggled financially for years, things have turned around for them recently. He is close to his mom and when he unwittingly puts her in danger, Xander is absolutely crushed by the weight of guilt after a confrontation goes horribly wrong. With this guilt pressing down on him, he takes matters into his own hands to protect his friends from danger. With a pocketful of cash, a hefty dose of paranoia and a somewhat ill-conceived plan, Xander's journey begins on a Greyhound bus. Arriving in a small college town, his goal is stay out of sight until Jill lets him know it is safe to return home. But things go quickly awry when accommodations are scarce and he is forced to find an alternate place to stay. Xander then goes on to make some rather unwise financial choices and he is soon rather desperate when his funds begin to run low. He discovers a handful of places he can go during the day but at night, his options are very limited. Ignoring Jill's continued pleas to return home, Xander sticks to his plan even as his situation becomes increasingly precarious. An unexpected friendship yields not only a job and a temporary place to stay, but an unanticipated friendship that provides him with a new perspective about himself and his future. *Life Before* is a well-written and engaging young adult novel that delves into some very difficult subject matter. Despite the gravity of these topics, Michele Bacon manages to keep the story from becoming overly dark or angst-ridden. Xander's plight is sympathetic and although his solution is not exactly well thought out, he gains valuable insight about himself and his life through his experiences and the people he meets.

All in all, a very touching story that I highly recommend to fans of the genre. I received a complimentary copy for review.

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