

Book Review: The Understudy  
By Morgan Richter

Thanks to NetGalley and Knopf, Pantheon and Vintage for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review. "The Understudy" has an expected publication date of August 5, 2025.

I have mixed feelings about Morgan Richter's soon-to-be-released novel "The Understudy," mostly because I finished the book and was confused over what I had just read. What I thought – from both the title and the opening chapters – would be story about a rivalry between an opera star and her understudy, quickly devolved into one of fraud, obsession, jealousy, and unrealistic scenarios.

Kit Margolis, stage name Katerina, has just landed her first lead role in the new opera *Barbarella*. Why anyone would even consider making an opera based on the 1968 cult movie of the same name is beyond me, but that's neither here nor there. Kit has a magnificent voice, but her stage presence and lack of emotional connection with the audience have the director, Daniel, eyeing her understudy, Yolanda – who has never performed in an opera before – as a replacement.

This, of course, leads to immediate friction between Kit and Yolanda, fueled by the latter's supposedly innocent prank of lacing Kit's tea with tetrahydrozoline (eye drops), which land her in the hospital. Yolanda even cops to the nasty deed. Despite this admittance, and subsequent 'innocent pranks,' Kit somehow finds herself developing a friendship with Yolanda.

And if that's not unrealistic enough, Kit immediately becomes a super sleuth when a crime is committed, somehow believing she can solve the mystery faster and better than the police – despite repeatedly placing herself in harm's way. Someone fighting for her operatic life just wouldn't go there.

I also found the characters, including Kit, difficult to like. None of them have any redeeming qualities, so there's really no incentive to root for anyone. Had the narrative retained its initial focus on the rivalry between Kit and Yolanda, that might have been more interesting. But too many plot deviations hindered the story's flow.

I'm not a huge fan of opera, stemming mostly from my lack of understanding of the genre. So, from that perspective, I appreciated Richter's detailed explanations of how an opera comes together, without getting overly technical. I may still never go to an opera, but at least I have a better understanding.

I'm not totally down on "The Understudy," I just feel it lost its way from what it could have been. Three out of five stars, and perhaps that's being a tad generous.