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LIS6565
Assignment #1: 10 YA Books - Summary/Review

Capetta, A.R. (2021). *Stranger Things: Rebel Robin*. Random House Publishing.
Category: LGBTQ+

Robin Buckley is a sophomore at Hawkins High School who doesn't really understand why she doesn't fit in the way everyone else around her does. She is determined to get out of Hawkins, a town that she thinks is the most boring place a person could be. Her favorite teacher tries to help her widen her horizons, encouraging her to try new things. Only after she sees her own thoughts through someone else's eyes does she make an important realization, and she embraces the Rebel Robin she's been all along.

For anyone who enjoyed the show, this book is a fun read. It takes place during the first season, so there are familiar character names and events sprinkled throughout the story, but it's not the focus here. The writing is great- the conversations flow very naturally, even during awkward interactions. This book is probably best for ages 14-18, as it is written with a high school perspective. At first I thought I would not list it as an essential YA book, but the more I think about it, I want to shift it into that category. When the book begins, Robin just feels out of place, and we are there with her when she has the realization that she likes girls instead of boys. And I think that the way it happens is so genuine- and frankly, it's really important for young adults to understand that not all paths are the same, and what some of those experiences look and feel like.

This book has the same vibe as the movie Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael.

Favorite quote: "...young people who do that tend to be under constant onslaught from the slings and arrows of outrageous teenagers."

Rowell, R. (2019). *Pumpkinheads*. First Second Books.
Category: Graphic novel, fiction

Deja and Josiah (Josie) have worked together every September and October through high school, and this is their senior year, and their last night working at the Pumpkin Patch. They each have a quest- Josie is going to finally talk to the girl he's had a crush on all these years, and Deja is going to get one last taste from all the treat stands at work. But it seems like everything is getting in the way- for both of them!

My favorite part was sprinkled throughout- it was Deja's continuously changing nickname for the girl Josie likes. She's a funny and clever character- I loved reading her dialogue. Also, I really

enjoy that the ending isn't fully spelled out. The author clearly gives the reader some credit and lets them connect some of the dots, which works perfectly here. The illustrations really add to the book- not just because it's a graphic novel, but because no one is drawn "perfectly"- from the main characters to the background people, it looks like someone drew actual people. At the end of the book, you can see the earliest sketch of the main characters and the author and illustrator discuss what changes they made from the original sketches. The age range for this is easily 12 and up- this book is largely focused on friendship and relatable for all who would be interested in reading it. In fact, it's a great book to give to someone who is just starting to dive in to the YA section from middle grades books.

Oseman, A. (2015). *Solitaire*. Harper Teen.

Category: Contemporary realistic novel

Tori is a complicated girl who likes diet lemonade and obscure things, and she doesn't seem to really understand friendship, making her relationships with Becky and Evelyn feel disjointed. And none of that is helped by her parents being basically absent and not making attempts to connect with her on a level that she would enjoy- her father keeps giving her books that she doesn't want to read. Michael and Lucas appear (reappear?) in her life and seem to shake things up, but is it in a good way or not?

So this is my first Oseman book. It felt chaotic. I enjoyed some of it, but didn't enjoy all of it. What I could relate to: most of the music references, and weirdly, having a school burn down. (My middle school was set ablaze by some of my fellow students in 8th grade. It wasn't a fun experience having to go to school from 12:30-5:30 every day for the rest of the year, sharing with another school, which used their campus from 7am-noon every day.) But I wasn't a fan of the chaotic, often stream-of-consciousness writing style. For the most part, that was easy to follow, and the subtle British differences (fizzy canned lemonade, for one) didn't trip me up. I did have to look up a few slang terms, but again, that wasn't the issue. The last few chapters were just hard to envision- it was like the picture of the movie in my mind was breaking up and I wasn't sure where people were, how much danger they were in, who was safe, etc. And perhaps that was the desired effect, it being pure chaos actually being in a fire. But it made me go back and re-read some parts only to find that another read didn't help. I also wish there had been more character development- especially in the Nick/Charlie dynamic, so it makes sense that Heartstopper came about. As for the age group I would recommend it for- it feels young, but the content of casual suicide references without much direct addressing of them bumps up my personal age recommendation to the upper edge of YA readers, at least 16 and up. I wouldn't say it's an essential YA book, but it's an impressive first book, and more so knowing the author was 17 when she wrote it.

Watts, J. (2021). *Needlework*. Three Rooms Press.

Category: Contemporary realistic novel

Kody is being raised by his grandmother in a very small, rural Kentucky town. His younger brother lives with an aunt and uncle. Their mom lives nearby, and is addicted to opioids. Kody isn't like anyone else he knows- he loves Dolly Parton, he spends his time quilting with his grandmother, and he has a secret that no one knows about. But he isn't the only one with secrets.

First of all, this is one of the best books I have ever read. The way the story unfolds, the character development, the authentic dialogue and inner monologue...it's not campy or overdone, but feels/sounds real. The way you can picture everything and everybody well, but it's not 'too much' description. This is easily a full 10/10 book for me. Not only would I recommend it, I already have texted two people I know to tell them about this book. Age level- the way it's written, I think if someone has interest in it, it's appropriate. It does tackle very heavy issues, and there were attempts at predatory behavior to a child, but they were handled very well. If I had to put an age on it, I would say 14 and up, but like I said, not strictly so. Absolutely an essential book for a YA collection. I'm not certain of other similar titles to compare it to, because in my head, it's just such a standout. This one is going to be hard to follow.

Brosnol, V. (2011). *Anya's ghost*. First Second Books.

Category: Supernatural

Anya is Russian, but moved to the States when she was about to enter kindergarten. She's successfully camouflaged herself as a "normal American teen" and avoids the one other Russian student as much as possible. One day she falls down a well and meets a ghost who died 90 years ago- and is very eager to get out and live a little. But Anya isn't sure how she feels about that.

This was a fun/light read, and good for reading after a heavier book like *Needlework*. There is a supernatural element, but it's not horror. I think the author did a good job telling the story, but I feel like there could have been more character and world development- especially with Anya's existing friendship with Siobhan and Dima. This is another great intro to YA for a younger audience, and I think even almost-YA kids of 11 would find it enjoyable and appropriate. I have not read a lot of graphic novels and I don't really read much supernatural fiction, so I again struggle to compare it to similar titles. It was, however, a well done graphic novel that made the story very easy to follow, as was *Pumpkinheads*. I don't know that I would put it on a list of essential YA books, but it is a really good light-hearted supernatural book- a bit creepy but not the stuff of nightmares. It's got a real "moral of the story" feel as the book progresses, so I can see a media center making it an essential YA title.

Thomas, A. (2020). *Cemetery boys*. Swoon Reads.

Category: Multicultural

Yadriel wants to be a brujo in his family's tradition, but because he is trans, his family has denied him the chance. He decides to go forward with the ceremony with the help of his friend Maritza and he ends up summoning the wrong spirit. And now the spirit- a troubled kid from his school- won't willingly move on until Yadriel helps him with a few things.

This book was one that, despite knowing I need to read several more books before the due date, I savored. I put a post-it flag for every instance of Spanish in the book that I knew from my high school classes (purple) and one for everything I had to look up to understand (green) and if it was translated immediately after, and didn't require any knowledge, I didn't flag it. I marked 18 examples of my high school Spanish class coming in handy and 10 instances of needing to use Google Translate while reading. The book was rich with cultural references- from lifestyle to foods/festivals to familial relationships. Not a lot of books make me cry...this is one of them. I really enjoyed this one- the characters were so well crafted that I was fully connected to them. I would consider this an essential addition to a YA collection, and one that is appropriate for anyone within the age range of 12 and up.

Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. Penguin Books.

Category: Realistic novel published before 1970

Ponyboy is a 14 year old greaser who lives with his two older brothers (who are 17 and 20 years old) because his parents died. When he and a friend are confronted/attacked by a group of Socs who attempt to drown Ponyboy, his friend stabs and kills one of them to save Ponyboy's life. They go on the run, there is a fire, there is a rescue of small children, and Ponyboy just isn't the same after all of that happens.

This is going to be an unpopular opinion...but I did not enjoy this book. Because it's considered a classic, I felt the need to read it, because I also had never seen the movie, so I knew nothing about it. The characters felt flat and stereotypical, and the "us vs them" mentality was just so pervasive that it got in the way of what could have been a good story. Also I found it strange that while the book describes multiple deaths, the line is drawn at cussing. The MANY times that the book tells you that someone cussed, but you never read the words- it feels disingenuous to the character telling the story. I would not recommend this book, to be honest, and don't feel that it's essential to a YA collection, because it glosses over the obvious mental illness that Ponyboy is experiencing when he is in the throes of grief and makes it seem like throwing back 5 pills is a totally fine thing for a 14 year old- those parts feel irresponsible. And I don't even include the excessive smoking in that- it was noted that he would feel sick from smoking, it was a product of the time, we know better now, etc. Also there were a few parts that felt absurd- the acrobatics that somehow all of them did because one of them took a class? Seemed to come out of nowhere and didn't have a purpose and didn't feel realistic. The fact that no one questioned how the church caught fire? I'm not sure they would have been seen as heroes if they were also the ones who put the kids into that scenario. And a white kid getting riddled with bullets by policemen in 1965 because he brandished a gun? It felt more "mobster movie" than "realistic tale from the past." Especially since the police were well aware of who he was. Age recommendation for this would be 12 and up due to the violence.

Ha, R. (2020). *Almost American girl*. Balzer + Bray.

Category: Nonfiction graphic novel

Chuna lives with her Mom in South Korea and is confused when their annual vacation destination is Alabama, but she always enjoys trips with her mother. When they arrive, she finds that she's been tricked and the plan is for her mother to marry a Korean man living in Alabama and to stay permanently in the States. Chuna misses her Korean food, friends, places- all of it. But she can choose an American name which she likes. Things continue to be hard for Chuna, now Robin, and eventually she and her Mom move to Virginia, just the two of them. When she finally does get to go back "home" she realizes that it's not just home that has changed, but her as well.

I enjoyed this book and how it was able to so clearly convey what learning a new language is like when you're immersed in it. Korean words were obviously written in English, but printed in blue, while English words were printed in black, so you could tell when characters were switching between languages. Also, a squiggle would appear instead of words when Chuna/Robin could not understand a word mid-sentence. For instance, when she is talking with someone about Halloween, the friend's speech bubble is "Okay. I have ~~~ costumes. ~~~ you can ~~~ one." I thought it was such a perfect way to express how Chuna/Robin was struggling with the receptive end of learning English. It was interesting learning about Korean culture and customs- things like teachers expecting bribes- that I would never have imagined. Though the publisher lists this as a book for ages 13-17, I can easily see this being a good read for anyone 10 and up. It's a realistic but not brutal account of racism and bullying. This would be a great addition to any YA collection, and yes, essential, because I don't feel like there is adequate Korean representation on most bookshelves, and this neither vilifies nor romanticizes it.

Thomas, A. (2021). *Concrete rose*. Balzer + Bray.

Category: Contemporary realistic novel

Maverick is a 17 year old who is being raised by his mother while his father is in jail because of gang activity. Now that Mav is getting older, he's expected to be a part of it, too, as it will offer him some protection and help. When Maverick discovers that he has not one, but two children to take care of himself, he has to make a lot of decisions.

First and foremost, I did not expect to relate to this book nearly as much as I did. So much in this is so relatable, no matter what your background. Any parent is going to chuckle, feel empathy, and understand a lot of what Mav is going through. When he "walked out" (which, to be honest, he stepped outside and it broke my heart that he thought he had to call that walking out) I just wanted to reach through the pages and say "oh, honey, we have all been there. Babies can be so hard and sometimes you just need to walk away, and you should be so proud of yourself for choosing the best option in that situation." It's hard to pinpoint my favorite parts of this book. Angie Thomas has an incredible gift for deep and complex characters, and timing. When Mav saw that watch on Red's wrist, I literally audibly gasped out loud. And this book had

me audibly laughing at MANY points when it came to Mav and how he interacted with Seven, his son. (And for real, none of it was exaggerated...every place that Seven showed up in this book was relatable. And hilarious.) Also, the entire scene of Mav getting upset about Dre, getting stoned, and showing up to work was perfection- while most shows/books/movies that feature stoned kids (Clueless, for one) make them come across as just annoying and like a caricature, Thomas makes this whole scene hilarious and way more realistic. This one is probably better for older teens, maybe 15/16 and up? There is a lot of more adult behavior- drugs, weapons, sex, gangs, crime, etc, that younger kids probably won't be as interested in reading, because it's not romanticized or glossed over at all- hearing about the smells in a crackhouse, for instance, just makes it all very realistic. It's also a very heavy book, emotionally. I found myself holding my breath during parts. Is this an essential YA book? Absolutely. Without a doubt, this is a slice of life that is real for a lot of kids, and the more we know about and understand what everyone is going through, the more compassion and connection we can have.

Curato, M. (2020). *Flamer*. Godwin Books.

Category: Challenged/banned book

Aiden is 14 and currently at summer camp with his Boy Scout troop. He's a "good Catholic boy" and he's noticing that he's having some feelings that he's not sure about. He gets bullied frequently enough that he's learned to mostly ignore it, but it still very much affects him. He wonders if he should just take matters into his own hands.

This book was pretty intense- you can definitely tell that the author had some personal experience with bullying. The imagery and words used in the story were vivid and jarring at times- but as it seemed like a lived experience, necessary. I think the recommended age for this book would be anyone in the YA age range, maybe a smidge beyond. Definitely appropriate for anyone 12 and up. I think my favorite part of the book was when Aiden has an internal monologue about how he can't be gay because he hates boys because they're so mean. You can tell that he's really struggling with his thoughts and dreams, and how he's trying to use logic to figure out feelings. This book was set in 1995, so while I don't normally want to recommend books that have slurs, I do remember that the f word was VERY commonly used among teens, so it's authentically placed, and addressed.