

First Opinion: *Roller Girl* as a Worthy Reading Bout

Jamieson, Victoria. *Roller Girl*. Dial, 2015.

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Roller Girl by Victoria Jamieson is a graphic novel about a twelve-year-old girl, Astrid, who is learning to navigate relationships with her friends and her mother, while also learning about herself and her passion—roller derby.

The story begins as Astrid retells the history of her relationship with her best friend, Nicole. As they have grown, they have each developed different interests. This would be the first summer they would not be doing everything together. Herein lies Astrid's first problem: how to be her own person, different and independent from her best friend, and how to cope with the fact that they have grown apart. Her best friend has other friends and cares about different things like dance, clothes, makeup, and boys.

Astrid does not tell her mother that Nicole will be going to ballet camp instead of junior roller derby camp. This becomes Astrid's second problem: how to tell her mother the truth when the truth also means having to explain something even she cannot comprehend—she is changing, and her relationship with Nicole is changing, too.

In junior roller derby camp, Astrid is struggling to learn to roller skate as well as how to play the sport. She is determined to be chosen as a key player on the team, the jammer. So, she trains hard and finds inspiration in her heroine, a professional roller derby player, Rainbow Bite. Astrid also makes a new friend, Zoey. All is going well between them until Zoey is chosen

as the jammer in the bout. This becomes Astrid's third problem: how to be a good friend and a team player when your friend gets what you wanted and were working hard towards.

As the story progresses and Astrid goes through outer and inner changes, the reader is asked to identify with Astrid. There are several points in the story where the narrator addresses the reader and asks: "what would you say in my position?" (52) or provides advice such as: "talk to [your parents] about your 'crazy mixed-up teenage feelings'" (181). As can be imagined, all of Astrid's problems come together and she finds that while her relationships with Nicole, her mother, and Zoey have changed, she has learned through these relationships much about herself, as well as how to be a friend and how to solve her problems. She, along with the reader, has learned a few things about the roller derby sport in the process, as well.

It is no surprise *Roller Girl* is awarded the Newbery Honor. Along with realistic characters and a believable plot, Jamieson's illustrations represent the subject matter truthfully even though, in graphic novel form, the illustrations are comic book-like. There is an appropriate balance between pictures and words. As a graphic novel, the illustrations provide exposition that advances the story and adds to the reading enjoyment. Contrast, movement, and balance are all appropriately utilized. For example, colors are used to highlight the contrast between Nicole and Astrid. A sense of movement is sometimes created with multiple small panels and other times within a panel with the use of curves and straight, sharp lines. Close-ups, extreme close-ups, and long-shot panels are well placed. The characters' facial expressions are often a focus in the illustrations. In particular, the characters' eyes and mouths express much of how they feel or what they think. More so than speech balloons and thought bubbles, the illustrations give the reader a sense of compassion and understanding that help in relating to Astrid and the in which she finds herself.

While the story and illustrations incorporate diverse characters (Astrid's family is Puerto Rican), multiculturalism does not contribute to how the plot develops or how the characters confront problems. The language and illustrations are well suited to the story and audience. In combination, they aptly convey Astrid's preteen attitude, humor, sarcasm, and exaggeration.

Cleverly, like an Easter egg, the author/illustrator, also known in the roller derby world as Winnie the Pow, incorporated Winnie the Pooh in a few illustrations. Teasingly, the novel ends with a splash panel of Asteroid and in the narration box there is a hint of another roller derby bout. So . . . will there be a sequel to *Roller Girl*? A series, perhaps? This reader would cheer for it. I'd enjoy reading about Astrid as she grows "Tougher. Stronger. Fearless!" (93).

About the Author

Adriana L. Medina is an associate professor of reading education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She skated through this novel with her daughter as part of their summer reading. While enjoying the story, Medina was taken back to the roller-skating days of her youth and thought about how, once you learn something new, it's easy to forget the struggle of learning it. She, like Astrid, took many falls while learning to roller skate. Oh, those bruised knees!