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REVIEW

Identity and Racism in Young Adult Literature

Marisa Frisk, Kirsi Anderson, Emma Barron

Growing up is all about figuring things out: who you are, what you care about, what you want to do with your life, and how all of these intersect. Diverse, coming-of-age novels such as *Felix Ever After*, *The Hate U Give*, and *King and the Dragonflies* all explore this by showing how youths' struggles with their intersecting identities (race, class, gender and/or sexuality) ultimately lead to them figuring out who they are. Through self-discovery and self-acceptance, the protagonists of these YA and middle-grade novels all come to similar realizations that they must embrace themselves to live authentically.

In society today, the LGBTQIA+ community is increasing awareness to those who identify in one of these ways but also providing understanding for those who may not understand. For people of color, this can often be a time where the fight against society is harder. In the book *Me and White Supremacy*, Saad shares an important note, "Black people who are transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming undoubtedly face even more racial abuse, discrimination, and harm than Black people who identify as cisgender and heterosexual" (Saad, 2020, p. 85). As an adolescent, books such as *Felix Ever After* allow students to find a connection to themselves, their identity, home, and race.

In this novel, high school student, Felix, has transitioned from being his father's daughter to his father's son. Although his father supported him financially through his transition, the emotional transition is a tough conversation the two of them must work through. We follow their father-son relationship and watch it evolve into mutual understanding and acceptance.

Felix relocated to St. Catherines (St. Cat's) fine art school in hopes of refining his talent to gain acceptance to Brown. One summer morning while the students are filing into St. Cat's for their summer arts program, they are stopped in their tracks when they see pictures of Felix before his transition with his dead name plastered on the wall. Ezra, his best friend, was the only one at the school to know who he used to be.

Filled with anger, hurt, and rage, Felix assumes that their ex best friend, Declan, is behind it and decides he is going to create a fake profile to break him the same way Felix felt broken. During his payback, he finds out Declan was not behind the pictures and with the help of a new friend, Leah, they are able to track down who did it.

Throughout the novel, we follow Felix on his summer journey to find himself. Although he transitioned, he is not quite sure if he identifies with being a boy. He knows he isn't a girl but the word boy doesn't slide off his tongue quite right. After attending an LGBTQ+ weekly group and an online search, he realizes that there are numerous other ways to identify. Felix shares this emotional realization on page 278, "Demiboy. A person who identifies as mostly or partly male...I try saying it out loud. Demiboy. Demiboy, demiboy, demiboy. I smile a little. I smile, and then

outright laugh, and might-even begin to cry a little.[...] The confidence that spreads through me. I know that this is right. It's kind of amazing, that there's a word that explains exactly how I feel, that takes away all of my confusion and questioning and hesitation" (Callender, 2020, p. 278). The

one statement that can resonate strongly with adolescents going through a time of confusion and questioning when Felix says, "A word that lets me know that there are others out there who feel exactly the same way I do" (Callender, 2020, p. 278).

Callender writes this young novel with compassion, heart, and rawness. He captures Felix's identity confusion, the daily trivials of high school students, and how the color of your skin is a battle that many of us will never quite understand.

In *The Hate U Give* (2017), 16-year-old Starr exists in two very different worlds: the predominantly white private school she attends and the predominantly Black neighborhood she

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and her family live in. When Starr witnesses her childhood friend, Khalil, being fatally shot by a cop while being unarmed, her worlds begin to collide. Her friends at school don't understand what Starr is going through, how she is stuck between wanting to stand up for her community and wanting to move on and forget. Rumors begin swirling about how Khalil was a drug dealer, how he pulled a gun on the cop, but only Starr knows the truth of what happened that night. Starr fears not only backlash from the police, but also wonders how her friends at school will feel about her if she begins to speak out about what happened the night her friend was killed. However, she soon realizes that she must use her voice to speak out against the injustices occurring in her community.

The novel explores Starr's complexity of identity and how she feels like she has to choose between one world or another. She never truly feels like she belongs at her school, and at the same time doesn't feel like she belongs in her hometown. A quote from the novel demonstrates this by Starr saying, "I've taught myself to speak with two different voices and only say certain things around certain people. I've mastered it" (Thomas, 2017, p. 301). She feels like she has to act a certain way around her white friends at school and a different way around the Black people in her neighborhood.

Starr, through her struggles with identity, begins a journey of self-discovery and learns how important it is to stand up for what you believe in. When the people in her community

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begin protesting the injustices in marginalized communities and police brutality, Starr knows she can't remain silent. Starr realizes she doesn't have to choose between her two worlds, her two identities. This shift is shown in the following quote towards the end of the novel: "I can't change where I come from or what I've been through, so why should I be ashamed of what makes me, me?" (Thomas, 2017, p. 441). This novel sheds light on issues facing Black communities through a very realistic protagonist struggling with issues many teens would find relatable, while also encouraging readers to find their voices and accept themselves for who they are.

In *King and the Dragonflies*, twelve-year-old King is trying to cope with the death of his older brother, Khalid. King believes that his brother has left his body behind and became a dragonfly, one of which landed on Khalid's casket during the funeral. King looks for dragonflies near his house, imagining that one of them could be his brother.

When King's close friend, Charles "Sandy" Sanders told him he was gay, King's brother Khalid told King he should not be friends with Sandy anymore, otherwise people might think he was gay too. Sandy comes from a racist family, which adds in more complications to their friendship. That night, Sheriff Sanders, Sandy's father, calls King's mother letting her know that Sandy went missing. King saw Sandy before he went missing, but questions if his father would even care about Sandy if he knew he was gay. When Sandy is found, the sheriff tells King's mother that King is the one who gave Sandy the idea to be gay. King admits to telling Sandy that he may be gay.

King and his family travel to New Orleans, where he meets his Aunt Idris, who also has a relative that visits her in her dreams. Sandy chooses to run away again, but this time he is not returned to his father. King then decides to tell a few of his friends that he is gay, but decides not to tell everyone because not everyone needs to know. To end the book, King realizes that his brother, Khalid, was with him all along and will be with him forever. The quote "The dragonflies are the same as they've been. They're the same as they will always be... Khalid wasn't a dragonfly. He wasn't anything that I could touch or see. But he's been with me all along. He'll stay with me until the end of time," (Callender, 2020, pp. 258-259) really shows King's realization that his brother can be found with him anywhere.

In the novel *King and the Dragonflies*, Callender really captures the identity struggle that King has as a Black, gay adolescent, as well as the struggle of the loss of his brother, Khalid.

A common theme in young adult literature is the exploration of identity. Felix explores his gender identity while also struggling with how his life being both Black and transgender is infinitely more difficult. Starr explores her identity of being Black while also existing in a predominantly white space, and she accepts that she wouldn't be the same person if she didn't exist in those dual worlds. King explores his sexuality even though being anything but heterosexual isn't accepted in his Black family, while struggling with the loss of his brother, who had told King he shouldn't let anyone think he's gay. By the end of the novels, the three young protagonists all learn that it is better to accept and embrace yourself and your identities,

rather than let the world dictate who you should be, especially a world that tries to maintain the status quo. It is important for adolescents to read books with diverse characters so that they can be introduced to experiences they may or may not encounter in their lives and to build empathy and understanding for those who may be different from themselves. These novels, each in their own unique way, fight against the status quo and give voices to those who have historically been silenced.

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