First Opinion: Apathy or Apathea: Making a Choice to Make a Difference


Lisa Schade Eckert

It took a second reading for this graphic novel to become somewhat endearing for me—though I am certain “endearing” is not the response MK Reed and Jonathan Hill, the author and illustrator respectively, were aiming for. I found parts of it a bit shrill the first time around for reasons I’ll explain below. The novel takes on several controversial issues with unabashed zeal, presenting them in sharp relief and with a particular social agenda clearly in mind. The result is mixed; adolescent characters learn some important political and cultural lessons but the incendiary tone, informed by a clear ideology, comes on strong at times.

The novel is set in Americus, OK, a conservative small town polarized when a group of vocally evangelical citizens organize to remove a fantasy novel from the shelves of the public library. Neil Barton, the main character, is entering 9th grade and, as an only child (whose father abandoned him and his mother) and a misfit at school, he finds solace from his outsider social status by immersing himself in a series a fantasy novels, The Adventures of Apathea Ravenchilde (which is a clear allusion to the Harry Potter series), and volunteering in the public library. His best friend, Danny, is also a fan of the series, and both boys, supported enthusiastically by Charlotte, the young and hip librarian, are eager to read the newly released book eight of the series. Trouble ensues when socially conservative parents
challenge the Ravenchilde series, calling for them to be banned. This group of parents is energized by the power of their convictions, while the rest of the community remains silent, suffering from apathy. The name of the town (Americus) and the main character of the fantasy series (Apathea) are hardly coincidental.

Neil and Danny are dubious when continually informed by teachers and community members that high school will be the best time of their lives; high school, for them, is a time of struggle and boredom. Characters representing various social cliques are realistically presented (bullies, jocks, Goths, nerds, etc), engaging in gossip because they don’t seem to have anything better to do. The friends Neil begins to make at school are also “othered” in various ways by the clothes they wear, economic status, religion (or lack thereof), sexual orientation, and, of course, a love of books and reading. While their individuality and sense of identity are celebrated rather than condemned, they are apathetic and choose to suffer through their years in high school rather than get involved and work to effect change. Even Neil’s mother is resigned to navigate through the gossip in the community by choosing the path of least resistance. It is only Charlotte (the librarian) whose passion for intellectual freedom eventually moves Neil to action.

Slightly edgy in content, the novel’s depiction of disenfranchised adolescents accurately portrays high school social reality. Subversive rejection of mainstream music lends authenticity to Neil’s first step toward growing up; when he’s introduced to punk rock, he condemns the “country or Christian rock” music on the radio in his conservative community and is immediately tuned in to the punk scene. The bands, incidentally, have humorously colorful and hip names: the Spent Pennies, Doublethink, Snot Rockets, Crap Spirals, and Lunch Time Riot, just to name a few. The lyrics further emphasize an undercurrent of anger and disillusionment that leaves no room for taking action and effecting change. The choice of music media, however, is puzzling for a contemporary young adult (YA) novel celebrating popular culture; music is shared and played on CD’s, with no mention of mp3 media players or downloading songs.

The illustrations are black and white, and the main narrative, that of Neil and his maturation, is cartoonish—interestingly so given the heavy subject matter of the narrative. Apathea Ravenchilde’s story-within-the-story mirrors Neil’s struggles to find his way in a contemporary high school social milieu. The Ravenchilde narrative is more elegantly drawn with bold and sweeping strokes. The result is a nice contrast between the two narratives even as similarities in theme unfold: Apathea must find her strength to stand up and make her way in her world just as Neil must do in his. Neil gains a greater sense of identity and the courage to speak up by vicariously experiencing the struggles of Apathea in her mythic world.

But the text is not without serious difficulties. The appropriate age for reading this book is unclear, the protagonist is 14, but the language, mild profanity, and some sub-
ject matter are clearly aimed at more mature adolescents. The book challenge conflict is the narrative center and serves as a vehicle to critique socially conservative positions and ideologies. It is certainly appropriate to offer social critique in YA literature; indeed, adolescents should engage in questioning the media messages bombarding them every day. Therefore, Neil’s eventual modeling of social action and community involvement is a valuable lesson. At times, however, the ideological and political message at the core of the narrative becomes shrill and overstated. Characters and conflicts are stereotypically, even excessively, polemic, essentializing and over simplifying complex social issues, with a clear line drawn between sides. Reed and Hill seem to underestimate adolescents’ ability to comprehend subtlety; Mrs. Burns (the main force behind the community movement to ban the Ravenchild books) calls the Constitutional separation of church and state “Godless leftie hogwash” and rips a book to shreds at the circulation desk of the public library while shouting at the librarian. Her assertion that such books are “scientifically proven to be harmful to children” references current positivist trends in education policy. In addition, the authors apparently sought to include every controversial issue they could squeeze in; one character’s announcement that he is gay seems gratuitous—though the irony of his parents’ “solution” is pretty satisfying and subversive.

There are many good reasons to include graphic novels in literature/literacy instruction and many good YA graphic novels from which to choose. Graphic novels are challenging, high interest, multicultural, and multimodal, presenting opportunities for reading strategy instruction and literary analysis that could draw even the most reluctant readers into a classroom discussion. Because the YA graphic novel genre has become so popular, there are options beyond *Americus* that are more appropriate for the classroom. But the themes of this novel, fighting apathy and standing up for what you believe in, will resonate with adolescent readers.

**About the Author**

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