

First Opinion: Through the Eyes of Rowan Pohi: School Experiences of a Witty Liar

Fletcher, Ralph. *Also Known as Rowan Pohi*. New York: Clarion Books, 2011.

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In Ralph Fletcher's novel, *Also Known as Rowan Pohi*, readers get to experience the adventures of Bobby Steele and his friends, Big Poobs and Marcus, as they come up with the brilliant idea of creating a fictitious applicant to Whitestone Preparatory School, an upper class high school adjacent to their low income neighborhood. The boys create Rowan Pohi, as a well-rounded student and football player from El Pinon High School in Arizona, who recently moved to the Riverview area. Incredulously, Rowan Pohi gets accepted to be a "Stony." After receiving the acceptance letter from Whitestone the boys analyze the situation and decide it is not a smart idea to proceed with the prank. They gather at an abandoned lot and in a mock ceremony, they "bury" Rowan Pohi and the acceptance letter from Whitestone.

The story unfolds humorously, as Bobby decides to bring the fictitious student back to life. Bobby gets involved in a series of both unfortunate and fortunate events as he assumes the role of Rowan Pohi, accepts admittance into Whitestone Preparatory School, and transforms into a "Stony."

Throughout the novel, Bobby, a young man who has faced hardship and for whom life has been difficult, struggles to keep his family's complex history a secret. The reader gains insight into Bobby's family life before and after his parents' divorce, about what it means to him to be the big brother looking after the well-being of his younger brother after their mother has left them, how it is for him to live with an estranged and distant father, and about his life in a disadvantaged neighborhood. While Bobby is assuming and creating the life of Rowan Pahi, the reader gets to know the real Bobby and the reasons why he is who he is and what he gains and loses by pretending to be Rowan Pahi.

This novel introduces complex issues, including issues of domestic violence and the ways government agencies get involved; lying and cheating, false representation, family relationships, overcoming past mistakes, and being true to oneself. These issues, along with important lessons about character development, are exemplified in the events that follow the instant Bobby's identity is revealed. The school administration acts as though they are oblivious to the fact that their motto is "Achievement and Integrity." Bobby's deception is definitely a violation of integrity, but no consequence is given for his action. This raises a very important question regarding character and values. Some readers might find it difficult to reconcile the decision of the school. When Bobby's father shows up at his son's disciplinary hearing, his presence and speech sways the committee. He shows strength of character in overcoming his own obstacles and defending Bobby, thereby demonstrating to Bobby his love and faith in him.

This realistic young adult novel also addresses the social realities that challenge youths at a middle and early high school age. Through Rowan Pahi, Fletcher illustrates the struggles and fantasies that shape an adolescent's life. He shows how adolescents question their lives and experiences as they discover other people's life styles, especially in the contrast between those who have access to the "good things" in life and those who do not. Fletcher introduces the reader to typical high school situations with a hint of thrill and humor as well as reality. The novel offers a window into the feelings, dreams, and struggles high school age youth face as they experience family conflicts, lack of resources, and aspirations for better life opportunities.

Overall, the novel is entertaining and written in a simple narrative style incorporating humor and suspense. The descriptive language allows the reader to visualize the events in the story. The book's short chapters should keep the attention of struggling readers. Fletcher's simple language is not overloaded with complex vocabulary, so his novel will be accessible to students, including English Language Learners, who struggle with reading. For many youths, this novel might seem to connect to their personal experiences. The humor, thrill, and sadness within *Also Known as Rowan Pahi* will be enjoyed by many young adult readers.

About the Author

Elkin Lenis is a doctoral student in the Urban Education Program in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He also works as an assistant principal at Monroe Middle School in Union County Schools, North Carolina. He has been a teacher of English Language Learners (ELLs) and a school administrator since he arrived in the United States in 2001. Elkin is interested in serving the educational needs of ELLs. His research focuses on the education and literacy development of English Language Learners.