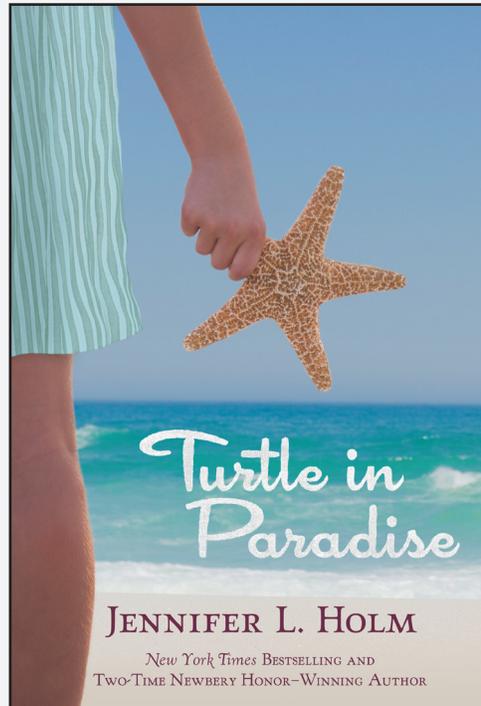


## Second Reaction: A Rewarding Journey to Realism

Holm, Jennifer L. *Turtle in Paradise*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Patrick Roe



Jennifer L. Holm's *Turtle in Paradise* is a bold deconstruction of the children's novel. A piece of realistic fiction within a historical setting, the book is a breath of fresh air as it reveals to young audiences a captivating and unpredictable narrative with classical sensibilities. What makes *Turtle in Paradise* such a significant read is the author's unflinching ability to interest adolescents in an unpleasant time period in American history and to present them with mature themes and internal struggles. Holm's greatest strength is her ability to make thought-provoking subject matter stimulating for children without talking down to her demographic or sounding preachy. The Newbery Award-winning novel is an exemplary work of children's literature and will engage young readers with its sincerity and uniqueness.

The story begins with a daring first person narration by our main character, Turtle. The eleven-year-old immediately shares her pessimistic outlook on life by explaining how she firmly believes that all children are wicked and self-centered. She gives accounts of witnessing kids throwing trash at adult strangers and setting her cat on fire for enter-

tainment. These details come to some pretty heavy material for the first pages of a book geared toward juveniles. However, given that the story is set in 1935 during the height of America's Great Depression, Turtle's sentiment seems fairly appropriate. There would have been millions of girls in Turtle's situation, and her viewpoint is one of a world-weary, young girl dealing with adult problems in a refreshingly brash and standoffish manner.

Young audiences are immediately thrown into the realism and struggle of growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. The book is a great reference to a time period without our modern leaps in technology, and it is told in a style free from the tropes of the fantasy genre that is flooding the current market of children's literature. There is no call to adventure for Turtle. She, better than anyone, understands the limitations of her environment and has developed a wise-beyond-her-years attitude in comparison to her immature cousins, mother, and even grandmother. Because of this, Turtle shines as a positive role model for young female readers as she outwits her peers, while dreaming of a brighter future.

Children need to be exposed to a variety of literature, and *Turtle in Paradise* is a terrific selection for its realism in a historical fiction novel. Many historical and social studies topics are covered, including the stock market crash of 1929, the development of the highway system, early twentieth-century economics, and the geography of the Florida Keys and the Caribbean. Also peppered into the plot are numerous pop culture references from the 1930s, including *Little Orphan Annie*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and Shirley Temple, whom Turtle frequently chides for her positive demeanor, which clashes with her own. The book is a valuable tool in the classroom for its gateway to a specific era during an important period in American history.

Turtle often remarks how real life isn't like the golden age of cinema that Hollywood would try to distract the public into believing. However, these brief moments of celluloid escapism are the only thing that most people have to brighten up their lives, and Turtle and her mother fall into similar fantasies of someday living happily ever after. After Turtle discovers the hidden treasure at the story's climax and is rescued from a deserted island, her mother arrives happily married with an ideal husband who is about to whisk the two off to live in their dream home. Just as the audience is lulled into the familiar cliché of everything working out for the best, after the main characters have overcome their own problems triumphantly, Holm pulls the rug out from underneath the reader. In the end, Turtle is the first to realize that her new stepfather has run off with the family's money, putting mother and daughter back to square one. This audacious and ultimately apt turn is exactly what makes *Turtle in Paradise* an important work in children's literature. Without alienating the audience, the story ends with Turtle and her mother valuing the family support that they have and growing closer as a result. It is a poignant and rewarding twist in a novel that has been firmly rooted in realism.

I read this book to my fourth grade class, usually one or two chapters each day. My

students were riveted to the plot; it was a big departure from their usual reading material, which typically consists of comical adventure stories, graphic novels, and science fiction. The children were so invested and engaged in the story that, by the shocking twist in the ending, many of their faces were visibly surprised, but they were appreciative of the author's frankness and originality. The students wrote reader-response journals describing their reactions to the story, and many of them wrote that they would love to see a sequel, a film adaptation, or to simply read the story again for pleasure. Several of them also wrote that they would recommend this book to a friend in need of a good novel. They were all anxious to take the Reading Counts test on the computer for *Turtle in Paradise* so that it could count towards their quarterly reading goal. Their feedback seemed to me the highest compliment a children's author can receive.

Jennifer L. Holm's *Turtle in Paradise* carries on the tradition of Dickens and Dahl, by centering the story on an abandoned child in an economically poor setting, and includes similar themes of dashed hopes, cruel surroundings, and a coming-of-age among mature issues. Through her entertaining storytelling, faithfully-written characters, and the inclusion of a historical context, Holm has crafted a piece of children's literature that will capture attention and demand shelf life.

### About the Author

**Patrick Roe** is a Purdue graduate and currently teaches fourth grade in West Lafayette, Indiana. For the few hours of the day when he is not in his classroom, Patrick enjoys live music, eclectic films, and traveling the world.