

## Second Reaction: *You Have Seven Messages* in the Middle School Classroom

Lewis, Stewart. *You Have Seven Messages*. New York: Delacorte, 2011.

*Jason Splichal*



With his novel, *You Have Seven Messages*, Stewart Lewis (author of *Rockstarlet* and *Relative Stranger*) stylistically breaks into the burgeoning world of mainstream young adult fiction. The singer-songwriter and radio journalist, living in New York City, convincingly tells the tale of Luna, his 14 year old protagonist. Written in appropriately spare and beautiful first-person prose, Luna's voice pulls the reader along on her journey of self-discovery.

Struggling with grief a year after the death of her super-model mother (struck and killed by a taxi in New York's East Village), Luna, her younger brother Tile, and her formerly-absent film director father are also struggling to be a functional family. In the process of cleaning out her mother's old studio, Luna is surprised to find her mom's cell phone: holding seven unheard messages. Once Luna makes the decision to listen to the messages, the very nature of her existence changes. She learns more about her mother than she ever wanted to know. She begins to realize that what she has been told about her mother's death isn't exactly the truth and that everything she thought was true about her

family might be nothing more than a lie. As the currents beneath these mysteries deepen, the pitch and roll of Luna's life—tossed about in the waves above—becomes too much.

As cliché, unbelievable, or superficial as this set-up may seem, Lewis creates a complex and authentic human being in the character of Luna, and her search for truth—amidst the wreckage of her deep interior life and the frenetically shallow backdrop of who she sometimes needs to be on the outside—is something most of this novel's readership can identify with. Luna's observations about the senseless beauty and horror of the world, as it appears when she feels no one but her is looking, is real and palpable. *You Have Seven Messages* explores the themes of loss, forgiveness, transformation, fear, courage, and redemption effectively through believably awkward and precious relationships. In the middle school classroom generally, and my 8th grade classroom in particular, students—roughly the same age as Luna—are familiar with these themes. Voracious and reluctant readers alike have previously experienced them as cornerstones of fiction. In YA literature, these themes are only as poignant as the characters, or the voices, that develop in the midst of the conflict created by the author addressing such themes. Many Young Adult Fiction readers, my students included, have come to expect that the themes which permeate books like this can and should produce rich character development, complexity of conflict, vivid imagery, and an accessible yet original voice. When these things are present, readers can easily suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to be swept away. *You Have Seven Messages* manages all of this literary magic, seemingly in spite of itself, in a svelte package that is neither overly didactic nor linguistically elaborate. It simply is, and the mysteries hidden within the folds of its pages simply are. This paradox is what many of my students—boys and girls alike—say they adore about the novel.

The beauty and power of this paradox is evident to readers from the beginning. The first chapter is a wispy, light-hearted confessional titled, "A Little About Moi." One quickly notices that the opposite page is emblazoned with a stanza of W.S. Merwin's: "Your absence has gone through me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color. (unpaged)" This paradox continues, unrelentingly, to the end of the book in a rare and most fulfilling fashion. One of the many lessons that my students and I learned, along with Luna, is that true love requires forgiveness, and that forgiveness is not blindness but, rather, a conscious act that can be just as transformative. We learned this, not by being told by her, but by living a life with her—life as it truly is for anyone who has been forced, against their will, to question what they have always taken for granted. For a generation of readers immersed in a culture of distraction, where human introspection must compete with the latest technology, what could be more valuable? *You Have Seven Messages* has earned its place in our English 8 classroom . . . and our hearts as well.

### **About the Author**

A recipient of The Lake Superior Writers Prize and The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets Muse Prize, **Jason Splichal** is an award-winning English teacher whose work has appeared in journals, magazines, and anthologies throughout the nation. Splichal is the author five books of poetry, including *The Disappeared* and *Flux*. He lives in Eau Claire, Wisconsin with his wife and sons.