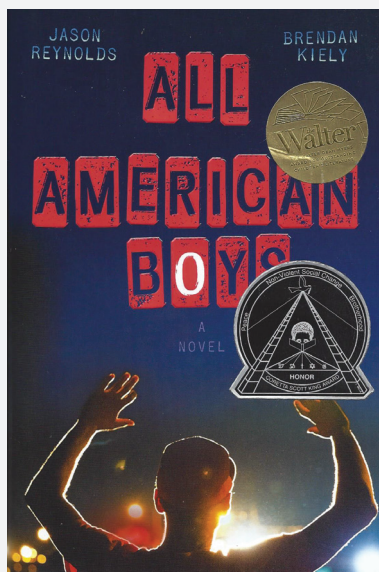


First Opinion: Race, Identity, and Social Justice in *All American Boys*

Reynolds, Jason, and Brendan Kiely. *All American Boys*. Antheneum Books, 2015.

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All American Boys, a young adult novel written by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, features a dual perspective from two narrators. Rashad Butler and Quinn Collins attend the same high school in a town called Springfield. Their lives do not intersect significantly until one night, when Rashad, a young black teenager, is arrested and beaten by a police officer on suspicion for robbery. Despite not committing a crime, he is yet another victim in an immense controversy of racism and police brutality that mirrors the very issues our American society faces today. Quinn secretly witnesses the brutal encounter and has to choose to stand aside or to take action. The novel recounts the events of the following week from both boys' perspectives. Rashad comes to terms with the racial profiling he experienced. Quinn struggles between the loyalty he feels for the officer, who is a family friend, and his desire to speak out against the violence committed against Rashad.

Over the course of the novel, both boys become aware of their positionality within U.S. society and try to figure out the best ways to be advocates for racial justice within their

communities. As the title of the novel suggests, what “all-American” means—and those who are excluded from it despite the seemingly encompassing term—becomes an issue. The narrative shows the apparent similarities between the two boys to further emphasize the underlying differences in their situations: “The reasons for the beatings were no comparison. . . . We lived in the same goddamn city, went to the same goddamn school, and our lives were so very goddamn different” (Reynolds and Kiely 261).

This novel did not present racism in essentialized terms. Rather, the internal conflicts that Rashad and Quinn experience are central to the ways in which they work through understanding their own racial identities. Rather than blaming an entire group or community, the narrative encourages readers to see how prevalent and pervasive issues of racism are and to act to make a difference. Setting the novel in Springfield highlights the pervasiveness of racism in the U.S., as there are towns of this name in 34 states (USGS). Author Brendan Kiely says sympathetic white people “have to recognize that we do have a role to play” (qtd. in Grigsby Bates par. 9). The book stresses the importance of each person recognizing his or her role in these problems and taking a stance. Being “neutral” is an option that is discouraged.

Janet Alsup points out that literature affects readers in two ways, through identifying with characters and empathizing with them. Students may identify with one narrator and empathize with the other. For white students, they may identify with Quinn’s internal journey as he is forced to face overt racism for the first time in his life. The readers follow Quinn’s internal journey as he moves from apathy to empathy and eventually to social action. For students of color, they may identify with Rashad as this encounter disrupts his identity and he begins to weigh the consequences he might face if he takes action for social justice. The novel reflects the black and white racial identity development experiences (Marshall), and in those reflections, young readers can see their own thoughts take shape as they examine their own racial identities (Bishop 5). Through Quinn’s and Rashad’s journeys, adolescents are provided a roadmap to cope with these real-world issues and are able to see the implications of the choices they make reflected in the text.

Moreover, *All American Boys* allows for fostering empathy by providing a window into a different racial identity than the reader’s own. Empathy, then, transforms readers and enables them to connect their reading experience to the real life struggles of others. Alsup writes that young adult literature has “an explicitly pedagogical function,” especially since the authors provide a window for adolescents and thus “encourage awareness and understanding of many different types of people, cultures, and communities . . . which may lead to attitudinal changes towards individuals different from the readers themselves” (70). Since social justice issues often require understanding these differences, acquiring empathy is key.

Given its two narrators, *All American Boys* may be viewed as a mirror and a window and may be used as a tool for positive social change. After deliberate consideration of multiple perspectives and weighing of personal consequences, both narrators become involved in a

demonstration against police brutality. This text could be used in a unit on social action. It could also be used to inspire young adults to organize, protest, and position for change in their communities. *All American Boys* is incredibly relevant in today's social climate, not only as a young adult novel, but also as a potential tool for teaching social change in the classroom. Its dual narrative provides multiple perspectives, which strengthens its argument for social justice implementation. It is a thoughtful and introspective book that is worthy to be a part of any young adult's library today.

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