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Dr. Mary Warner

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ENGL 112B

Book Talk: *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power

1. Give author information/biography

Website: <https://itsrorypower.com/>

Rory Power is a New York Times bestselling young adult author, who has written both wilder girls and burn our bodies down. She attended University of East Anglia, where she received a masters’ degree in Prose Fiction. She lives currently in New England.

1. Summary

Raxter island was supposed to be a safe space; a place for learning – a boarding school for girls, just off the New England coast. But something changed, something twisted, a virus the girls call the Tox. It mutates, destroys the girls one by one, brings 100 girls down to 60 and dwindling. It’s only when Hetty realizes that Byatt is missing after going to the infirmary does something change. Hetty discovers that what might be unknown is something that can be tackled, and that there is always a way to discover the truth. Hetty is a 16-year-old girl navigating an environment that not only wants her dead, but flourishes in unknowns and half-truths. It’s up to her to determine how to move forward, and what steps to take.

1. Significant Quotes

“She checks over my shoulder, eyes lingering on the spruce trees, and I shift a little. I want to ask if she knows what RAX009 means, but I remember the way she looked at me on the dock. The way we know things we’re not supposed to talk about. Is this another test? Is keeping this secret part of my job, too?” (78)

Hetty grapples with the concept of what is right and wrong; who’s truth is correct, and are they lying for the right reasons? The girls are starving, and yet Hetty and the Boat Crew dump over half of it into the ocean regularly because of pesticides. She has to juggle a morality issue now, because is it right to tell the other girls what is happening, what’s the truth, or is it better to leave them in the dark? It poses the question: is lying always wrong, if it’s done to protect others? is it better to be naive than understand? The discovery of the RAX009 vial shows that Hetty isn’t getting the full story, and she starts to doubt if she ever was.

“We can get through it with her,” I say. “That’s all we have left. And I’m not giving up. I might not know where she is right now, but I know where she’ll be tomorrow night. I’m going out there after her.” (110)

Hetty is fiercely loyal to a fault. She is willing to risk everything to find Byatt, and this can be construed as both reckless and brave. She’s started to distrust the authority, the structure she’s taken for granted because it’s taken her friend from her and she needs answers. The Tox is terrifying, and Hetty needs stability, she needs whatever structures she can get. This quote is important because it highlights exactly when she decides to take control over her own actions, and this is the turning point in the novel.

“Do you think I want this?” She says. She sounds hoarse, and I can barely pick out one word from the next, every ounce of exhaustion crashing down on both of us at once. “We don’t get to choose what hurts us.” (225)

Loss and death are key themes; desperation and loneliness is seeped into the pages from all the characters. Reese just watched her girlfriend kill her father – her father who was sick, rotten from the inside out, possessed in the worst possible way – watches as her girlfriend saves her own life and tears her father’s heart out with a knife. This quote struck me because it’s true: no one gets to choose what hurts us. Hetty doesn’t get to choose, Reese doesn’t get to choose, neither does anyone else. To be hurt means you were vulnerable, and being vulnerable in an animalistic setting feels counterproductive. They feel guilty over being hurt, and it only emphasizes the Hetty clings to her friendships because they’re the only thing that feels normal to her anymore.

1. Bibliographical Analysis

The utilization of repetition is one of the strongest parts of the novel. The repeating of phrases, of “She’s alive, she’s alive” (110) and using the same short, clipped sentences “Can’t move. Can’t breathe,” are indicators of Hetty’s mounting panic (106). We can’t tell that she’s panicking, because Hetty isn’t the most reliable narrator – but we know she’s panicking from how the internal monologue changes – it shifts from longer sentences to clipped, repetitive phrases, almost like she’s grasping for something to be there, and it feels like a sense of denial and repression of the truth.

Additionally, when we get a perspective from Byatt, the phrasing is warped to show how her train of thought has been hindered (by the virus? By the medication?). The writing is more like prose, more like poetry, and isn’t bound by the same restraints as classical literature is. This change in style adds weight to her point and adds emphasis to Power’s novel as a whole.

When categorizing this novel with from chapters from *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story,* it’s obvious that there are a number of correct answers. The most correct, however, is category seven: books on survival and courage. Wilder Girls, at its core, is about survival. It’s Hetty’s survival, it’s Byatt’s, Reece’s, all of the girls. It’s about living and being brave and being able to navigate through those concepts and feelings that come with the mindset of survival. This gives young readers the opportunity to read and decide how to make their own choices if something like this were too occur (not on this scale, so to speak, but it still allows the reader this sense of identity, and opportunity to explore). The other book category that this follows with is category five: books about facing death and loss. All the girls know is loss; they’ve seen so many of their friends die, and in some cases, needed to kill their friends themselves because the virus made them too wild. This novel helps with the coping and the understanding that loss is a complex emotion and there isn’t one right way to mourn, because the situations we all face are not the same.

1. Text Complexity

**Quantitative Complexity:** When utilizing the Lexile and ATOS complexity scales, it places *Wilder Girls* at a HL730L and 4.8 respectively. This novel is intended for older readers, around grade levels 9-12, as it contains darker imagery and has a more complex vocabulary. The sentences Power uses are often longer, which make it harder for younger readers to stay focused. Additionally, the novel has an AR point score of 12.0.

**Qualitative Complexity:** The novel talks in depth about themes of murder and survival. It contains a graphic suicide and violence, so it should not be taken lightly – it also mentions in an offhanded way on self-harming, which is again another concept that prospective readers should be aware of. There is strong language throughout the novel. It is easily a horror thriller, as the reader is left wondering how the girls are going to receive a cure for the virus. It also tackles LGBT romance in a way that isn’t the norm; it’s less about queer romance and the discovery of being queer, but that the main character (and others) happen to like girls. It’s a refreshing take that young readers should have the opportunity to read.

**Reader Task Considerations:** *Wilder Girls* relates perfectly with the current climate. The novel is centered around a pandemic – this virus is more debilitating, more mutating, as it physically transforms you by giving you altered characteristics, but it’s still a virus – much like what’s happening at this very moment. This book is very dark, and highlights the deeper, more twisted sides of young adult fiction, similar to novels like Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games*. It contains murder, and body horror; but with it this novel also contains disability representation and is a source of LGBT literature. Hetty is bisexual, and while romance isn’t the main theme of the book it’s not ignored, and the normalcy of this is something that would benefit a lot of younger readers who are trying to navigate their own sexualities.