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*These Shallow Graves* by Jennifer Donnelly

Author Biography:

Jennifer Donnelly writes novels for middle grade, young adult, and adult readers and is a *New York Times* bestselling author. Donnelly has won numerous awards for her writing, including the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Young Adult Literature. When asked what advice she would give to young, aspiring writers, she wrote on her website that they should

“listen to your own thoughts and feelings very carefully, be aware of your observations, and learn to value them. When you’re a teenager – and even when you’re older – lots of people will try to tell you what to think and feel. Try to stand still inside all of that and hear your own voice. It’s yours and only yours, it’s unique and worthy of your attention, and if you cultivate it properly, it might just make you a writer” (jenniferdonnelly.com).

Summary:

Josephine Montfort, Jo for short, lives the life that is expected of her. She goes to school and dreams of being a reporter with the expectation that she will give it all up to become a proper high society wife soon. When her father dies under mysterious circumstances, Jo enlists the help of a reporter, Edward Gallagher, to help her uncover the truth. With Eddie’s guidance, Jo learns that there is much more to New York than she was ever able to see from her family’s townhouse and must decide if she can give up her family’s expectations in order to truly be happy.

Quotes:

“I have difficulty believing…they’d done something very wrong” (128). As Jo delves deeper into the mystery surrounding her father’s death, she is repeatedly confronted with the fact that her family’s company, Van Heusen Shipping, may have been involved in something awful. This would mean that her father, uncle, and other men she has grown up idolizing are not as good as she always believed them to be. Eddie is often the one pushing Jo to accept this potential truth about her world. Jo is still unable to believe in this possibility, but this scene marks the beginning of Jo’s shifting world view and highlights the fact that, if what they are uncovering is true, her entire world may be based on a lie. As we grow older, we must often confront the fact that the world is not as rosy as we believed it to be as children. While our truths are often not as extreme as Jo’s turns out to be, it is still often a very emotional process.

“Jo smiled and tried her best…as she left the room” (134). When the reader meets Jo, she is already a girl enamored with the idea of being like the reporter Nellie Bly- that is, a female reporter who takes risks in order to tell the stories of the people that no one will listen to. After she begins her investigation with Eddie, she begins to realize just how stifling her world is. She is trapped by the mourning conventions forced upon high society women, trapped by her gender, and trapped by the need to be the perfect daughter in order to not upset her grieving mother. However, she now has first hand experience with the exciting and dangerous world that exists just a few streets down from her, and she finds the idea of pursuing that world much more exciting than continuing on as she always has. She is also confronted with the fact that pursuing that desire means forsaking the future that her family is so insistent that she have. Jo is now having to contend with the fact that her dreams and her world’s expectations cannot coexist, and this means either giving up on herself or giving up everything and everyone she has ever known. Even today, many children find themselves burdened by what their family wants for them and must struggle with finding a way to be true to themselves without disappointing their families.

“Oh I don’t know… The freedom to be your own best thing” (290). This story is told from the perspective of a wealthy girl who feels trapped by what is expected of her. This quote marks Jo’s blossoming friendship with Fay, a pickpocket who has to contend with the fact that the man she works for has sold her to a whorehouse. Although her circumstances are entirely different from Jo’s, both girls are lamenting over the fact that they do not have the freedom to do as they wish. If Jo pursues Eddie and her dreams of being a reporter, she will not have access to her family or her family’s money, which is her safety net. However, if she pursues the marriage that her family is arranging for her, she has to give up who she is. Fay has no such choices- she will either be a prostitute or be killed by the man who has provided her with shelter since she was abandoned as a baby. Because they are women, and even more so because Fay has no money, neither girl is allowed the freedom to choose their own life. As teens make the journey from childhood to adulthood, they often find that their dreams are not possible in the real world. Many have to give up their dreams in order to find a job that will provide for them. While Jo and Fay face specific examples, not having the freedom to do exactly what you please is still something that plagues humanity today.

How to Teach:

This novel is appropriate for high school aged kids because there are some discussions of sexuality, suicide, drug use, and prostitution. A certain level of maturity is required to be able to grapple with these topics and discussions. Jo is also on the cusp of adulthood, and she is trying to figure out what she truly wants out of life and how to achieve these goals. This is something that high school students, particularly older ones, can relate to as they try to plan for life after high school.

Teens should read this book because it is an interesting mystery that is able to address societal issues that are still, to an extent, relevant today. Many people will be able to identify with Jo’s struggle to decide between her family’s expectations and her own desires. The characters and setting feel very real, and it is an easy book to lose yourself in.

This book fits into three categories: death and loss; books about identity, struggles with decisions; and books about courage and survival. It fits into death and loss because while Jo is trying to uncover the truth about her father’s passing, she is mourning his death. It is a book about identity and struggles with decisions because Jo must decide who she wants to be and faces a series of difficult choices in order to become who she wants to be. Lastly, it is a story about courage and survival because Jo is willing to leave her entire world behind to find the truth about her father’s death and give up her very safe, very orderly world in order to forge her own path and follow her dreams.

Text Complexity:

* Qualitative: Lexile.com gives it a rating of 610L-800L. Vocabulary is not something that a native English speaker of high school age would struggle with. Sentence length varies a bit, but it usually on the shorter side. The language and structure of the sentences is straightforward.
* Reader-task: This novel is a work of historical fiction, and as such, it may turn off some readers. However, it is not a novel that requires outside knowledge of the time period in order to understand the characters’ struggles or to appreciate the story. The main characters are all teenagers or young adults that are struggling to either find their place in the world or to succeed in the place that they have secured. This is a universal message that can be found throughout time.
* Implicit Complexity: This story deals with some tougher themes: finding oneself, family death, and restrictive social class to name a few. Jo must learn many lessons about the world outside of her gilded cage, and she does so in a clear way that lets the reader learn along with her. Jo meets with characters who are trying to make the most out of a bad situation and others who are determined to keep others in those bad situations. This novel showcases a wide range of humanity that Jo, along with the readers, must learn how to contend with.