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ENGL 112B

November 7, 2022

***Cinderella is Dead***

By Kalynn Bayron

**Publisher**: Bloomsbury YA (July 2020)

**ISBN13:**9781338803273



Author Website: <https://www.kalynnbayron.com/>

Photo Credit: author website

Kalynn Bayron is the New York Times and Indie bestselling author of the YA fantasy novels *Cinderella is Dead* and *This Poison Heart*. *Cinderella is Dead* is Kalynn Bayron’s debut novel. In college she studied music and Opera—hoping that one day she would become a storyteller. She is a CILIP Carnegie Medal Nominee, a two-time CYBILS Award nominee, and the recipient of the 2022 Randall Keenan Award for Black LGBTQ fiction. She is active with book tours to schools and bookshops.

**Bayron’s Writing Process:**

*“It wasn’t until I sat down and said: OK, I’m going to write this book for me, I’m going to write this story for the 15, 16, 17-year-old version of me, who really wanted to see a Black girl in a ball gown on the cover of a YA fantasy. And when I wrote that story that’s when everything kind of clicked into place. So, write the story that you want to tell…” –* Kalynn Bayron *(BookPeople Teen Press Corp)*

When she is writing, Bayron focuses on world-building and drafting a plot, so that she can experiment with a character’s feelings, actions, and behaviors.  Craft books that Bayron enjoys are Jessica Brody’s *Save The Cat Write a Novel* and Jeff Vander Meer’s, *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction.*

She loves the Brothers Grimm fairytales, and when writing *Cinderella is Dead,* she watched and read every adaption of *Cinderella* to make sure she really gathered all the research and information necessary. Bayron is also a major fan of horror films and novels, which shows in her text and writing. Additionally, she looks to authors, such as Toni Morrison, for inspiration

When struggling with writer’s block, Bayron will take a step back from her writing and ask herself questions: “Is there is an issue with plot or pacing? Am I in the right POV? Am I in the right character's head? Often, this helps me pinpoint what the issue is, and I can move forward” (Bayron, FAQ).

*Cinderella is Dead* is a frequently banned book. Bayron speaks in an interview with Pen America that she is afraid of her book being banned because the book has resonated with so many teenagers and their parents: “it made me feel seen” and “it made me decide to stay alive, to try one more time” (Pen America).

**Summary of *Cinderella is Dead***

Cinderella was a beautiful young girl who wished for a Fairy Godmother to appear and whisk her away to a ball where she would fall in love with Prince Charming, or so the story goes. Two hundred years later, Sophia is preparing to attend the same ball as Cinderella did. It is a tradition for the girls of Lille to study the story of Cinderella and hope that if they are as good and pure as Cinderella once was, they too will be chosen by a fairy godmother and suitable husband. Except everyone is afraid of who will choose them as their wife and what their life will be like after the ball. Unlike, Cinderella, Sophia does not want to marry a Prince, she wants to marry a Princess. Against all odds, Sophia escapes the ball and meets Constance, the last living relative of Cinderella. Together they collaborate with an unlikely friend or foe to unearth the mystery of Cinderella and take the whole kingdom down. Is this what Cinderella meant when she said she wanted every girl to have her happily ever after?

What would you do if everything you knew was a lie?

**Quotes #1: “‘What I think doesn’t matter…. Then stand with me. Behind me, beside me, something. Please’… ‘I hate how out of control I feel’” (70-79).**

**Analysis:** Sophia is headstrong, rash, and impulsive at times and as a result, her relationship with her parents is often nuanced and complex.  Sophia does not want to attend the ball or become subject to an unknown husband’s hand. If she is not chosen, she will be forfeited to a fate worse than death. Her parents love her, but they fear her rebelliousness and sexuality. Members of the LGBTQ+ community must hide and conform to the rules, even if it means they are unhappy for the rest of their lives. This fear highlights the power of political and social rules even in real-world contemporary times. Sophia’s parents clearly care about their daughter and want to protect her, but their protectives enforce and perpetrate the oppressive danger.

In this society, women are objects, nothing more than something that men use and abuse until they have their fill. There are exceptions of course but the objectification remains. It reflects how the internalized messages of patriarchy withstand time and maintain patriarchal gender dynamics.

**Quote #2: “… ‘It will be me’, I say. ‘*I* will find myself’…” (235-239).**

When Sophia and Constance meet Amina, the Fairy Godmother, they are introduced to the magic and truth of Lille. Sophia reflects on the shame that she feels for her feelings of love for Constance even miles away from Lille. This shame is rooted deep in her, stemming from cultural indoctrination. Even though Sophia wants to let her feelings be open—she is afraid. Sophia has spent so much time hiding her true self and trying to conform that she never had a chance to find out who she is. What does she like, what can she do, who does she love, and who loves her back? When Amina asks who is going to look for her if she is lost, Sophia answers, “it will be me...I will find myself” (236). Sophia is an incredibly brave character with a large heart. Not only is willing to embrace her sexuality she is willing to take down an enemy no matter what.

**Quote# 3: “Suddenly, a light, like liquid starlight, flows from Amina’s fingertips to the trunk of the massive trees, snacking out onto it’s branches… ‘Constance loops her arm under mine, and we walk toward the front of the house. We pass a row of windows, mostly fragments still hanging in their frames, and I catch a glimpse of myself. I peer into the glass and reach up to touch my hair. My natural curls hand down around my shoulders, held away from my face by tiny silver butterflies made of glass set on silver pins. My skin shines, brown and beautiful, free from rouge or powder. ‘You’re stunning’, Constance says. She plants a kiss on my check and lets her lips linger there. Her touch sends little sparks of fire straight through me” (315-319).**

**Analysis:**

Sophia is a window and mirror into the lives of young girls of color. Her beauty and vivid imagery are described as a young black girl who is confident in her appearance. When she embraces herself, she can ease into her relationship with Constance.

While the novel takes place in a world with magic, Sophia has no powers. She is an ordinary girl who wants to do better and make a change in the world she lives in. Sophia’s power come from her voice and actions—not from magic. Sophia is not going to get her happily ever after because she has a magical dress or the girl of her dreams. She is going to win because she has resiliency. Sophia wants to share the truth and spark a change in this cruel society.

*Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*

*Cinderella is Dead* works through topics of: fantasy and imagination, LGBTQIA+ people and rights; and Black Identity. Bayron’s main protagonists are strong female characters who reflect the experiences of teen readers.

**Chapter 4: “Books about Real--Life Experiences Making Life Choices, Facing Violence or Abuse, and Living through Family and Relationship Issue”**

* Teens experience rejection from their first crush or love.

Sophia’s first love rejects her out of fear that their illegal homosexual love will be discovered. She rejects Sophia to protect herself and parents from the public if they are discovered.

* Teens may feel ostracized because they are different or have different desires for love or futuristic ambitions. They should learn that just because their dreams and desires are different from their peers, it does not make them any less worthy. This novel shows how one young woman overcomes rejection and is resilient.
* Teens may experience rejection from their peers and receive violent actions.
* Teens may experience saying yes to going out on a date even though they do not feel safe from peer pressure.

In the novel, Erin accepts the marriage proposal of an abusive suitor to save her family and her own life. The novel provides evidence that she is physically and verbally abused by her husband.

Teens may also find safety and security in a person but then discover that this person is an abuser or rapist, it can be difficult to deal with.

When Cinderella rejects her husband Prince Charming, he inflicts abuse and punishment on her and the citizens. Liv, a close friend, was an innocent girl but did not dress to the King’s standards and was killed to make an example. The seamstress does nothing wrong, but her husband physically abuses her by hitting her verbally berates her.

* Teens might have had experienced or be experiencing abuse. They need to know that they never did anything to deserve abuse. They are worthy of safety, love, and happiness.

The novel parallels this experience because in the town of Lille, women and men are abused by those in powerful positions. They are forced to maintain the status-quo or face certain death. Teenagers and adults in Lille pressure each other into acting in accordance with the laws to avoid punishment.

* Additionally, *Cinderella is Dead* covers topics of Depictions of domestic, abuse, homophobia, misogyny, physical violence, animal death, nonconsensual kissing, and some gore (a public execution, description of a corpse).

**Chapter 5: “Dealing with Death and Loss”**

* Teens may struggle with grief and the death of a loved one.

The novel works through death and loss in relation to abusive relationships. As well as the metaphysical loss of a first love and of identity. The fear of death and punishment is a driving force that encourages characters to behave in manors that are at times inexcusable. Sophia loses her first love, her family, and one of her best friends. She must learn how to cope with the death of her best friend and looks toward justice to provide comfort for the family.

* Teens may experience watching a loved one die

A seamstress is graphically murdered to illustrate how people who go against power, or the heterosexual norm are punished. This also can be related to women’s suffrage, generation trauma, and genocidal wars. Constance’s entire family is murder and hunted for being related to the wicked stepsisters and calling for change against the cruel political and social system.

* Teens may be struggling with the pain of loss and be unsure of how to act.

Grief is an emotion that young adolescents struggle to process. Another character dives into dark arts to cope with the loss of her child. She is unable to grieve for her child and looks for unconventional ways to reconnect with him. In the novel, the characters participate in necromancy and speak to the dead again. While this is a magical element, teens may look for spiritual ways to grieve and communicate with their loved ones again.

* When teens become privy to the secrets of the past reality can feel disillusioned.

One of the major plot points of the novel revolve around the death and life of Cinderella. Why would she encourage the suffering of young girls, when she herself was suppressed by the will of a King?

**Chapter 6: “Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”**

* Teens may identify within the LGBTQ+ community and feel unsupported by their family and friends

Sophia is a queer young black woman fighting against a patriarchal system set up against her. She is in love with her best friend, Erin, but Erin is incapable of returning the same emotions for Sophia because she is afraid of being forfeited, disowned, or killed. Sophia’s own parents tell her to ignore her homoerotic feelings for Erin. Sophia recognizes that the abusive and oppressive actions and behaviors around her are not right.

* Teens may struggle with making life difficult life decisions out of fear

Often, the characters make tough decisions out of fear rather than by what is just.

* Teens may struggle with coming to terms with identity and questioning the status-quo.

Sophia, the narrator, and heroine is a black queer young woman. Sophia’s independent thinking and resiliency allow her to see things for what they are and question the status quo. Erin, Sophia’s best friend and first love, struggles with conflicting feelings between her love for Sophia and her desire to please her parents. Luke, Sophia’s newfound friend, has an honorable and sweet demeanor that contrasts the darkness of the abusive men in Lille. Mannford is monstrous King who oppresses his Kingdom. Amina is a witch whose motives remain unclear. Together these characters show the dangers of adhering to the status-quo.

**Chapter 7: “Courage and Survival”**

* Teens may not feel when they are going through the motions and monotony of everyday life, but they show courage by continuing to face their own challenges. They also have a right to learn about places in the world that still do not honor women’s or LGBTQ+ rights.

Throughout the novel, Sophia seeks justice and equality through resistance and bravery. Under the oppressive rule of the antagonist King Mannford. The community and society “Lillie” lives within are fearful of going against the status-quo and keeping order by oppressing women and men into a heteronormative lifestyle. The consequence of going against the King’s order is to become a forfeit, a fate worse than death. Women are kept as property and expected to behave accordingly.

* Teens may not feel brave when they are unable to speak up for themselves or stand out in their identity. The novel embraces the notion that it is brave to speak up, to defend another, and to resist.

Sophia’s journey is less about uncovering the mystery of Cinderella’s true story and more about figuring out how to bring about change in a community that relies on oppression to maintain power. She is brave when she tells Erin she loves her, escapes the kingdom, befriends an enemy, and fights the patriarchy. That there is still a battle go onward.

* Teens may not feel courageous enough to assert their opinions.

Constance, her love interest, is a witty, knowledgeable, scrappy redheaded survivor. Sophia and Constance want to burn this kingdom, this system of generational oppression, to the ground and start fresh. They are young impulsive and full of life—even if they are still figuring out who they are.  The novel teaches to fight for your rights: “Do not be silent. Raise your voice. Be a light in the dark” (385).

**Chapter 8: “Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable”**

* The novel is filled with mystical elements, fantasy, and magic.

The plot serves as a hyperbolic representation of real-world problems and systemic systems of abuse and discrimination. *Cinderella is Dead* has dual meaning because the patriarchal views must die with the passive story of Cinderella.

* The novel is centered around the folk-tale *Cinderella*, whose origins date to 7BC in Ancient Greece and is a widely popular tale that teenagers are familiar with (New World Encyclopedia, “Cinderella”). The tale of Cinderella has been remade and retold countless times to encompass the story of a person, mostly a girl, who achieves success after a period of neglect or poverty.

**Why use Cinderella as an allegory for teaching feminist critique?**

“Cinderella” has been used as a hallmark tall for feminists’ critiques for centuries to illustrate the debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles. The story of “Cinderella” equates femineity to submission. It encourages women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently for a rescue, and present’s marriage as a reward for “good girl” behavior. Men are then expected to be “Prince Charming” by acting emotionally stoic and provide for their “fair maiden”. It promotes the idea that marriage to the right man will solve all financial and social problems. It also creates this idea that “good girls”, like Cinderella, who obey the patriarchal norms by acting submissive, angelic, and pure will be rewarded. “Bad girls” like the Wicked Stepsister’s, who act petty, vain, and jealous, will be punished. Within the novel, the female characters, such as Liv, belive that if they are “good girls” and obey “Cinderella’s Story” they will be rewarded with marriage and honor their families. When rebellious characters, like Sophia, defy the norms of the Kingdom, they are punished and ostracized.

The citizens and leaders within the story reflect the internalized norms and values of patriarchy. It uses traditional gender roles to cast men as strong protective leaders and women as weak and inferior. These gender roles are used to exclude women from equal access to leadership, job-security, and wages. The women are meant to be the “Angel within the house” figure who never fail to tend to husbands, fathers, and brother’s needs­ over their own. Men are expected to act aggressive, commanding, physically powerful, and remain emotionally static. However, the novel undermines these notions by explicitly naming the wrongs and showing the hidden abuse behind the mask of normality.

Sophia, and queer teenagers, homosexuality goes against the heterosexual gender roles and the norms within the patriarchy. The patriarchal desire for men of privilege to dominate women in marriage, sexuality, and finances is problematic and reflected in contempered times. Failure to adhere to these standards is ostracization. The existing laws and commandment of the ball, forbid women from rising above men and promotes the sexist belief that women are innately inferior to men. Any character that goes against these norm’s is punished.

Sophia never ascends a throne, but she does rise above her circumstances. The dystopic retelling of Cinderella shines a light on the feminist issues and queer people of a society that overlooks them in the name of the status-quo; and proves that when we stand united against a common enemy, no man nor kingdom can stop justice. The true story of Cinderella and Sophia “stand as a testament to persistency and bravery— even in the face of oppression” (385).

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative**

Lexile: HL710L

ATOS:

* Book Level: 4.9
* Interest Level: Upper Grades (UG 9-12)
* AR Points: 13
* Word Count: 85452

Dale-Chall:

* Raw score 3.5008 - Grade 4 and Below
* Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 3.5008)
* Final Score: 7.1

New Dale-Chall Readability Index: Grade level: Grades 9 - 10

Flesch-Kincaid:5th grade

**Qualitative**

**Structure:** *Cinderella is Dead* is an intertextual novel that draws on the ancient fable of “Cinderella”. The novel is an imaginative retelling filled with twists, turns, and a well-structured plot. It is easy to comprehend and understand because of the explicit wording. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of Sophia, the protagonist and heroine of the story. Bayron structures chronology with her characters discussing the past but never by flashbacking. There is a brief scene of divination, but it is presented with linearity to the text’s timeline.

Bayron writes exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension. The novel is close to four hundred pages, but the print is large, and the words are spaced out evenly. Bayron includes magical elements and plot twists that all serve purposes and bring a deeper meaning to the novel’s overarching themes. Bayron’s honed observations and commentary on contemporary society made up the backbone of the story and was powerful. She both tells and shows the emotions of her characters and explicitly names the wrongs within the society. The plot and message are powerful but at times fall flat because of how didactic Bayron is about her message, but nonetheless, the novel is still impactful.

**Language Convention and Clarity:**  The vocabulary is not overly complex, but lively, varied, and imaginative.  The textual vocabulary of the novel is basic and easy to read, as well as grammatically correct while being neither patronizing nor simplistic for its Lexile complexity. The wit, sass, and struggle for identity make it clear that this is a perspective of a teenager.

The various levels of sophistication that will lead to the continual development of reading skills are metaphor, foreshadowing, and descriptive language. To read the novel there needs to be a general awareness of the *Cinderella* fable and adaptions. There also needs to be a general awareness of the previously discussed topics and trigger warnings.

**Knowledge Demands:** There are depictions of domestic violence, generational trauma, abuse, homophobia, misogyny, physical violence, animal death, nonconsensual kissing, and gore (a public execution, necromancy, and description of a corpse). These themes open the door for conversations to be had about the wider world and its difficult and challenging issues. They are both subjective and objective and give insight into the process of struggling to take on an identity when you do not feel safe.

The novel breaks down why events like why the girls of Lille are oppressed and killed to perceive male systemic power, why women are trapped in relationships within domestic abuse and violence, and the power of cultural indoctrination and internalization. When reading there should be an awareness that victims in an abusive romantic relationship, particularly domestic, are often trapped and do not have a choice. The text includes graphic images and insinuates men taking female power via sexual assault. However, Bayron provides evidence of a “not all men” feminist argument through the actions and words of Luke, a gay young man.  Teenagers can make inferences and connections to their own communities and worldviews about how societies rely on alienating a group to help themselves.

Overall, *Cinderella is Dead* is more qualitatively complex than quantitively indicated. The vocabulary and Lexile indicate that the novel is written for middle schoolers to higher schoolers. This is because the text explores various complex qualitative knowledge and requires a basic level of social awareness for a full understanding of the meaning. The text is best read by ages thirteen to sixteen. Typically, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen teenagers begin to grapple with their identity and place in the world. There are heavy themes, but they are easy to follow due to the (at times) didactic language and heavy-handed messages. Yet, it is still an easy read to comprehend and finish.

**Other Books by Kalynn Bayron to consider reading:**

Bayron’s novels are centered around strong young black women and supernatural elements. She seamlessly weaves non-binary and queer characters into the plot, just as they should be. Bayron latest works include the YA fantasy *This Poison Heart;* and its sequel *This Wicked Fate;* and the middle grade paranormal adventure *The Vanquishers*. Her newest book is *My Dear Henry: A Jekyll & Hyde Remix*, is a gothic YA remix of Dr. Jekyll and Hyde and is set to be published in 2023.

**Bayron, Kalynn, *This Poison Heart*. Publisher**: Bloomsbury YA; (June 2021)

**ISBN:** 9781547603909

**Photo credit:** Author Website

*This Poison Heart* tells the story of a young girl, Briseis, a young girl who is struggling to control her botanical powers. Bri has the power can grow plants from tiny seeds to rich blooms with a single touch. When she moves to New York hoping to control her powers she instead becomes enveloped into a sinister century old mystery surrounding her aunt’s apothecary’s estate and community her. Her Aunt’s 40-acre estate gift comes with a specific set of instructions, an old-school apothecary, and a walled garden filled with the deadliest botanicals in the world. There are secrets in Bri’s inheritance and legacy from her aunt that ties to Greek myths in dark ways.

The novel was a nominated for a number of awards and won an Instant Indie Bestseller.

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