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ENGL112B

Professor Warner

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The Grace Year

by Kim Liggett





Author Website and Photo Credit: <https://www.kimliggett.com/about/>

**About the Author:**

Kim Liggett was born in rural New York in 1970 and at the age of sixteen left all of that behind. She pursued a life in the arts becoming a singer for multiple bands in the 1980’s ranging from punk to rock to country. She now lives with her husband and two teenage sons in New York. *The Grace Year* is her latest novel, soon to be adapted into a movie directed and produced by Elizabeth Banks under Universal Studios.

**Other Works:** *Blood and Salt*, *The Last Harvest*, *Heart of Ash*, *The Unfortunates*

**From “Acknowledgments” in *The Grace Year*:**

Her novel *The Grace Year* was written while on a train to D.C. after witnessing an interaction between a young girl, a businessman, and an older woman. She was drawn to their different energies as the girl was oblivious to the businessman ogling at her and the older woman looking at her with disdain and sadness. Various emotions rose within Liggett as she thought of other women in her life and created the plot of the novel on the train. She then felt obligated to finish and publish her creation resulting in *The Grace Year*.

**Summary:**

The girls in Garner County possess magic that draws out the worst in both men and women. This magic is the most dangerous when girls reach the age of sixteen, resulting in the Grace Year being formed. Only in their grace year can a girl from Garner County be sent out with others her age to get rid of their magic with the only rule being to never speak of the Grace Year once it ends. Despite being raised a good county girl, Tierney doesn’t believe in magic or the subjugation of the women and girls around her. She vows to survive whatever lies in her Grace Year to live a life working in the fields. When that dream gets plundered with the promise of marriage, Tierney must face the scrutiny of the other mad-driven girls as well as the poachers that crave their magical flesh. Tierney is left to ponder the truth about their magic as well as how likely she will survive her most deadly and bloody year.

**Quote #1:**

“I look away, pretending to be fascinated by the dots of hazy light seeping in through the eyelet curtains… Sometimes I feel like my eyes are going to sear right out of my skull” (9-10 and all other quotes are from *The Grace Year* by Kim Liggett).

 Tierney’s character is exemplified by the passage as well as her thoughts on Garner County. She shows resentment towards her father for holding sexist values especially because she considered them to be close when she was growing up. Due to the county’s views of women, she associates their bond to him compensating for not having a son and feels betrayed by him still striving to have one. She mostly shows anger at having to live by the rules and regulations of Garner County because it is expected of her to be a wife after her Grace Year which she has many objections towards, and rightfully so. Instead she lets her anger and helplessness build inside her due to fear of punishment. It depicts her as a strong protagonist who wants to defy the expectations placed on her. She does not want to be a docile wife that gets told what to do, say, or think. However, she has to be smart about any decisions she makes in order to not get punished and attain her own happiness.

**Quote #2:**

“I feel a distant memory tugging at me. My veiling day… My body. My soul. That’s the one thing they will never be able to control in me” (274-275).

This is a moment that Tierney feels free from the restraints of the county. She is able to feel like she is in complete control of her actions without the fear of repercussion or under anyone’s influence. It shows her growth as she is not concerned with the repercussions of her actions and is living in the moment. More importantly, Tierney views this moment as liberating because she is no longer hiding away her feelings or pretending to be someone she is not. It also ties back to how Tierney wished to have ownership over her own body and mind at the beginning of the novel. By being with Ryker in an intimate way, she is embracing the power of making her own decisions with her body which is highly prohibited in the county and even at the camp with the other grace year girls. She comes to the realization that while the county tries to enforce control over the women, the reality is that their authority is fabricated. Her body and mind is her own and no one else’s and she can do with it as she pleases.

**Quote #3:**

“Covered in blood and filth, my torn cloak exposing my body for all to see, I sink to my knees before them…And isn’t this what we’ve all been searching for? We may be without powers, but we are not powerless.” (356-359).

The grace year girls finally find a sense of camaraderie by not letting Kiersten die. As Tierney leads the girls, she recalls the awful treatment Kiersten subjected her through but shows that she has grown beyond seeking revenge. She wants peace between the girls and by doing that she takes charge to save Kiersten. Otherwise, she would have let Anders, the poacher, kill Kiersten in front of everyone. In doing this, she is able to find humanity in Kiersten despite her oppressive rule over the grace year girls and becomes an even stronger protagonist for this decision. Not everyone would save their bully when given the chance, especially when that bully left you at the brink of death. Having the other girls unify against a common cause reveals that Tierney no longer sees them as competition or rivals. She views them as allies who can help fight back against their larger enemy and break the cycle of oppression imposed onto them.

**How I Would Teach It**

 I would like to teach this novel along with *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood and have Atwood’s novel be the student’s primary reading. I would mostly use *The Grace Year* as a secondary source because it is more contemporary and takes the perspective of a teen as compared to the much older Offred in Atwood’s novel which teens would be better able to relate to. Due to the graphic elements of both novels, I would prefer to have students in high school read both works due to their maturity. As they read *The Handmaid’s Tale*, my students would get passages of *The Grace Year* to compare how the characters from each novel overcome their conflicts. The novels would be used for a unit on feminism and be taught with poems like “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou and “They shut me up in Prose” (#445) by Emily Dickinson as they take feminist perspectives through the voices of women. The poems would be read before they read Atwood’s novel to prepare them for the feminist themes in it. For *The Grace Year* in particular, I would select passages where Tierney shows resilience and works through her most difficult moments in the novel.

**Why use it to Teach?**

While the plot of the novel is dystopian, the issues Tierney and the girls face are contemporary. Teens are not strangers to the complex inequalities between the sexes and even if they are, this book helps shed some light through a feminist perspective of extreme discrimination. Tierney is a strong female protagonist who overcomes many hardships in smart ways. Teens can look up to Tierney for being a leader and taking the steps necessary to help others and not just herself. Her journey to realize this builds her into a character that teens can relate to as well as support. The relationship between Tierney and the other girls can also be used as examples for finding community and togetherness because they realize that instead of seeing each other as competition, they can rely on each other. This is an important lesson for teens to know so they are encouraged to build relationships with those around them. They would hopefully understand that finding solidarity with others is better than believing they are up against the world by themselves. The premise of the story is also intriguing and combines elements of survival and suspense that is reminiscent of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding which most young readers are familiar with.

***Adolescents in the Search for Meaning***

Chapter 4: Books About Real Life Experience

* Tierney struggles with making friendships with the other girls in Garner County, instead putting a target on her back for doing what most girls in the County would never get away with.
	+ Kiersten and her posse in particular are bullies to Tierney because they consider her an outsider and for standing up to their torment. Most teens would relate to Tieney’s anger and level of inferiority that Kiersten forces upon Tierney but could also look up to Tierney for not letting Kiersten’s negativity affect her as a person.
* The strained relationship between Tierney and her mother is explored and developed throughout the novel as she learns to accept her mother’s form of love.
	+ Tierney always thought her mom would scrutinize her for not being a malleable girl. However, she later has a heart to heart with her mother that changes her perspective of her which allows her to be closer to her mom. Their relationship could be an example of what teens face at home in not seeing eye-to-eye with their own parents.
* Tierney also experiences love and the aspects of having a relationship.
	+ She meets and gradually falls in love with Ryker. Like most teens, Tierney’s strong feelings towards Ryker influences her goals in life as she risks her and her family’s lives to be with him.

Chapter 5: Facing Loss and Death

* Due to the laws of the County, Tierney faces death regularly, especially because executions are made as spectacles.
	+ Many girls Tierney had known are killed in the Grace Year which Tierney has to come to terms with. Their loss weighs on Tierney and it is only through the help of the other Grace Year girls that she is able to relieve herself of guilt and sadness.

Chapter 6: Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

* There are extreme forms of gender discrimination against the women and girls in Garner County.
	+ Liggett took inspiration for the novel based on an interaction she saw between a young girl, an older man, and an older woman when she was on a train. While the world Tierney lives in is fictional, sexism and discrimination based on gender influence the characters in the novel.
* Teirney’s relationship with Ryker forces Tierney to make difficult decisions.
	+ She has to make the decision between her own happiness and her responsibilities. While she knows that she can be happy with Ryker, it would jeopardize the lives of her sisters. On the other hand, if she goes back to the County she would live out the rest of her life in misery.

Chapter 7: Courage and Survival

* Tierney faces death multiple times throughout her Grace Year but gains the courage to fight for herself and the other girls.
	+ Tierney is driven to survive for the sake of her sisters and to live a life where she can find happiness. She is often targeted by the other girls because of her aspirations but remains strong. There are moments where she is close to giving up but finds the strength to push through.
	+ She shares her survivalist knowledge to the other girls to help them through their Grace Year. Even after she is discouraged by Kiersten, Tierney continues to use her knowledge to keep herself and the others alive.

Chapter 8: Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable

* The story of Adam and Eve is referenced throughout the novel.
	+ Eve is used as an example against the rights of women in the County because of Eve’s sin.

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative Complexity:**

Word Count: 103,055

Page Count: 416

Lexile: Ages 14-17, HL810L

Dale-Chall: Grades 7-8, Ages 12-13, Score: 45

Based on the quantitative complexity of the novel, I would recommend it to students in 9th grade.

**Qualitative Complexity:**

 The overall diction of the novel leaves it a fairly easy book to read. The content of the book however could be more challenging for younger readers to comprehend. The women in the novel are mistreated due to a higher sense of superiority from the men. There is physical violence as well as emotional torment inflicted on the women and girls in the novel which could be difficult for some teens to read. Liggett does not stray from the gory details of what happens to the girls or the frustration and anguish felt by Tierney so students should be forewarned in regards to the content of certain chapters and scenes.

 The structure of the novel is linear with memories that are recalled by Tierney being condensed to less than a page. Tierney is always thinking about her future and what could be but this is always in relation to the context of the plot making it simple to follow. The story is separated into five parts that consist of one year: Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer, and The Return. The titles of the parts relay the season at the present time in the story which brings new challenges for Tierney to face. Separating the parts of the novel through the seasons helps with keeping the plot of the story linear and consistent.

 Based on the qualitative complexity of the novel, I would recommend the novel to students in 9th grade.

**“Reader Tasks”:**

Teens that read the novel should be familiar with Christian themes as the characters in Garner County use them as justification for mistreating their women. The Bible is also referenced throughout the novel, particularly the story of Adam and Eve. Reading variations of the tale could help with a deeper understanding of why exactly this story is used in support of female discrimination. Discussions of how religion, specifically Christianity, can be used to oppress women and the rights of women would be beneficial for the student's understanding of the feminist elements in the novel.

Readers should also know about flower language and what flowers mean when given to others. Even if they are not familiar with flower language, Tierney is able to translate the meaning of certain flowers throughout the novel as they are used as secret messages. Therefore it is not necessary but very helpful to know.