***The Sun is Also a Star-* Nicola Yoon**



<http://emergency-danceparty.tumblr.com/post/156869884108/i-didnt-know-you-this-morning-and-now-i-dont>

* About the Author:

<http://www.nicolayoon.com/bio/>

Nicola Yoon was born in Jamaica and moved to the United States when she was eleven. She lived in Brooklyn and now resides in Los Angeles.

Her husband is Korean American.

In her own words: she is a “helpless romantic goober.”

* Book Summary:

This is the story of Natasha: a Jamaican American girl who had a plan. As of a few months ago, she was supposed to graduate from a challenging magnet school focusing on science. She was supposed to be touring colleges in California with her best friend Bev. She was supposed to be *normal* until she was forced to uproot her whole life because of a mistake her father made.

This is the story of Daniel, too: a Korean American boy with the heart of a poet. With the weight of his parents’ expectations and his brother’s failures on his shoulders. And though he doesn’t have to make a choice, *right now* the way Natasha does, what happened in these twelve hours will impact his whole life.

But this is also the story of others; of the people Natasha and Daniel meet and love and lose in between.

* Quotes:

“Don’t tell me I’ll be all right… what about Prom and graduation and my friends?” (22)

Yoon deals with Natasha’s inevitable departure from the very first page of her novel. Deals with the feelings of denial and helplessness that she has at been uprooted from the only home she’s known for almost a decade. In this part, she’s trying to get help, to find a way in which she can stay in the country. She’s trying to get somebody to help her, but what she finds are closed doors at every turn. When she eventually finds someone, he treats her in a condescending manner as if she can’t understand her situation because she’s a teenager. He believes that because he’s older and he spent a week in Jamaica he knows the truth about the country better than she does. This part, so early in the novel, is important because it lays out a pretty accurate portrayal of the frustration and anger and fear a teenager might have at having her own birthplace and culture “explained to her” by somebody who has only seen the beach-resort-vacation façade poor countries put up for tourism.

“I didn’t care what the reason for the gifts was…They know that I kind of hate myself for not worshipping him at all now.” (64-65)

This quote comes from Natasha, and it is about her father. The reason why she is being taken away from her home. She describes their relationship, back in Jamaica and when she had recently immigrated to the US, as very close. She used to nearly worship him; she’d help him run his lines and go with him places. Now that she has grown up, and he has disillusioned her in more than one way, she misses that connection. She misses the father that she used to know and knowing, without a doubt, that he loved her. They have a big confrontation near the end that leaves them both a little more broken, and doesn’t get resolved. It is so painfully real, but it also points out a very important fact. Family, parents, will hurt their children knowingly or not, but that doesn’t mean they get a free pass. It doesn’t mean that children need to stay silent when it happens. Sometimes parents need to hear the ways in which they are hurting their children. It might not fix everything, but it will be a step forward.

“She’d written her suicide note at lunch… But his voice didn’t break, and there was a kind of joy in it, too.” (341)

This passage comes from the perspective of Irene. She has three separate chapters of her own. She’s a very minor character that doesn’t exactly do much to move the narrative along. Her first chapter explains her mental state: the loneliness and helpless and lack of human contact she has. It explains her mental illnesses without labeling them as such. It gives the descriptions, the snapshots, of how *not okay* she is. The second chapter has her coming up to the conclusion that if she were to disappear nothing would change for anyone else, but she would stop suffering. She decides that committing suicide is the best option. Then there’s this part, ten years later, when we find out that she didn’t kill herself. She *decides* to keep living and get help. In this part, she explains how a thirty second message from Natasha and a Nirvana song led her to *choose to keep living*. In Irene’s first chapter states how insignificant she feels to the rest of the world and how meaningless her life has become, she’s a security guard, and when she decides to commit suicide she’s very blasé about it. I think Irene’s chapters, though barely connected to Natasha and Daniel’s story, are very important because they offer a new perspective to whoever is reading it about loneliness and depression. More than anything, her *decision* to keep on living and getting help for herself is important for anyone who might be going through the same situation. She might not be significant for the overall story of Natasha and Daniel, but she’s still *important.*

* Why should teens read this?

The novel is set in New York City, which is brimming with diversity. The main characters are both teenagers of color who are confronted with the reality of prejudice and racism in both overt and subtle ways. They are confronted with the reality that a biracial couple is not always going to be accepted, and that sometimes that rejection comes from one or both of their families.

Yoon also brings up small snapshots of secondary characters throughout the novel. Charlie, Daniel’s brother, is not developed but he’s shown to the reader and his role in Daniel’s life is clearly defined. Natasha’s father, who is responsible for her current predicament, also has a few chapters of his own. As does Daniel’s dad, and it helps explain his perspective on why he is the way he is with his sons. Even characters that might seem insignificant in the grand scheme of the novel have at least one chapter dedicated solely to them. Perhaps the most important one is Irene who doesn’t really have a role in Natasha or Daniel’s story, but who has a few chapters dedicated to her. She goes from being extremely lonely and depressed and suicidal to *deciding* that she wants to keep living.

A small part of it, which I found touching and important, is Natasha’s love for music. She walks around everywhere with a pair of hot pink headphones. She visits a record store on her last day in NYC. She points out that listening to Nirvana helps her own state of mind, and allows her to sort through her own feelings. In a time when teenagers are being told that they’re too obsessed with their music I think it’s important for them to understand that music *does* help and it *is* a good outlet when they need it. That if Logic or Fall Out Boy or whoever they like helps them understand their own selves then they should be allowed to explore that. This scenes shed light in the importance of literature, in any medium, and how impactful it can be.

* Introduction to the classroom:

*The Sun is Also a Star* meets two different categories of books. The first: “Books about Real-Life Experiences.” Natasha and Daniel have difficult choices to make throughout the novel as well as living through emotionally taxing problems with their families. They fall in love quickly and powerfully, they have to face the reality of choices about their futures and the fact that sometimes timing isn’t right. The second category that this book meets is “Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions.” Daniel has a hard time throughout the novel coming to grips with the belief that he will always be second best in his parents’ eyes. Natasha is faced with the daunting reality that she has to go back to a country where she doesn’t belong and wonders what kind of girl she’s supposed to be now. Natasha and Daniel are faced with racism and prejudice throughout the novel because she is black and because of the type of family Daniel comes from. Daniel also has to decide what he wants the rest of his life to be like; he has an interview with a Yale alum who could get him set up with a pre-med program, but he’s not sure that that’s what he wants the rest of his life to look like.

In a technical aspect, this novel would be very helpful to use when introducing the different types of points of views that appear in literature. The chapters with Natasha and Daniel are set up as first person, but there are other characters that also get their own chapters. The novel contains third person limited when Irene or the parents’ are introduced because though their stories are told from an outsider’s perspective they are mainly focused on just one character’s experience. There is also a third person omniscient, however, that makes an appearance whenever a chapter explaining a certain concept comes up. Near the end, also, there is a chapter that is told from both Natasha and Daniel’s perspectives.

*Romeo and* Juliet—William Shakespeare: This novel could also be paired up with several canonical works. The overall idea that Natasha and Daniel are not meant to be together pairs up with Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Though Natasha and Daniel’s story doesn’t end in death, they are kept apart by circumstances, and their families’ disapproval.

*Great Expectations—*Charles Dickens: Though Daniel’s brother only has one chapter at the beginning and only has brief appearances later on, his characterization brings Pip to mind. Not because he was raised in the same circumstances as Pip, but because his own expectations bring about his downfall. From a very early age Charlie is described as a boy who rejects his heritage, and goes as far as ostracizing and bullying his own brother because of it. He has his own belief of what his life will be like, how great it will become, and he does whatever he can to get there. By the end, we are given a snapshot of what his life will become and though he has power and money for a bit, he will bring about his own downfall.

This novel could be used to introduce literary theories focusing on ethnic diversity. It could be paired up with canonical works that deal with discrimination and racial struggle. There’s a whole chapter in Yoon’s novel that explains the “black hair care” industry and how it came about. There is another chapter that explains some of the reasons behind the immigration of South Korean nationals into the United States. Natasha’s experience as a first generation immigrant and Daniel’s experience as a second generation are explored throughout the novel. This novel could be an asset when teaching American Literature because it would prompt students to think about *what* exactly American literature and American culture means, and what the roles of different immigration waves have had in shaping that culture.

* Text Complexity:

In regards to the reading level and the text complexity, Yoon’s novel is ranked as appropriate for ages 12 and up. Complex sentences and paragraphs can be noted throughout as well as the introduction to scientific concepts that may be difficult to understand. Yoon also manages to blend specific cultures, Jamaican and Korean, with mainstream American culture to form a more encompassing experience for the reader. In schools where students may have various backgrounds and experiences having a novel that relates to their own ethnic identity and overall mainstream American culture may prove to be beneficial. It has a “High-Low” Lexile score. What this means is that it could be used to encourage reluctant readers to begin a reading habit, and to introduce them to more varied and complex topics.

Yoon’s novel manages to hit a lot of the Exeter Qualities throughout its development. Her story is based, mostly, on Natasha and Daniel’s perspectives but she also brings in chapters from the people they interact with along their twelve hour journey. Apart from Natasha’s struggle with her departure and Daniel’s unease at choosing a future he doesn’t want, Yoon introduces bigger social issues such as racism, immigration, class struggles, depression, suicide, consumerism and many more. One of the most poignant themes in her novel, I believe, is the way in which she explores family. The way in which she presents parents who screw up, and don’t know how to fix things, and don’t know how to talk about important emotional issues with their kids because it helps bring a reality that teenagers begin to see. Teenage years are when we stop expecting our parents to be infallible and begin to understand that they are, in fact, human. Both Natasha and Daniel go through the complex and heartbreaking reality of being hurt and disillusioned by members of their family they looked up to when they were little. Not only does she explore issues that expand beyond their own lives, but she also makes Natasha and Daniel’s stories rich with struggles that any person reading it could encounter in real life.

Yoon also expands with the astronomy and science references through her novel. There are short chapters dedicated to *educating* the reader about scientific facts and theories and history and religion. There’s a whole chapter dedicated to an important part of Jamaican history. There’s a chapter dedicated to explaining how love is similar to astronomy. There’s a chapter that explains the “three scientific stages of love,” and the chemicals in the body responsible for making people feel certain things. Yoon doesn’t simplify the concepts, but rather she explains them concisely and fully.