*Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*

Discussion Questions Teacher’s Guide – Part II

Reader Response Questions

1. Answers will vary depending on students’ experiences.
2. Students may suggest that the title of the book is offensive toward teens who already see themselves as “outsiders” – farther pushing them away. Some students may find that this title is encouraging and motivating, however. It gives a place for those who don’t fit in to connect with others and find a community.
3. Answers will vary depending on students’ experiences.
4. Answers will vary depending on students’ experiences.
5. Some students may sympathize with Mara and find justification for her behavior – likening it to an experience that have had or observed. Others may think Mara’s actions are completely inappropriate and believe there is no circumstance under which such hurtful words should be spoken to a friend.
6. Our society is moving in a more accepting direction. Some struggles that Gabe faced that could be struggles for LGBT teens today are using public restrooms, applying for a job, anything that requires one to identify their gender by choosing between only male or female (applications, etc.), maintaining supportive relationships among peers, and bullying.
7. Since Gabe is the main character in our story, it makes sense for him to be the one relating the story to us. Gabe may not be completely unreliable, but he could certainly be biased in the way he relates certain events to us, always making himself the victim. The story told from the perspective of, say, Gabe’s parents, would give us a completely different bias and perhaps communicate a more negative and less accepting message about LGBT teens.
8. Music is one of the driving forces behind the novel, however, if students are not familiar with most of the musical references, they may find themselves distracted or annoyed by its constant presence.
9. Answers will vary depending on students’ experiences.
10. Students may find that the end of the novel is unrealistic, but exciting and engaging. Some students may not have even considered the fact that receiving such a large sum of money could be an unrealistic way to end a novel.

Critical Synthesis Questions

1. While this vandalism may not be legally appropriate, it is accomplishing a greater good of bringing people together who find that they don’t fit in anywhere else. Students will probably support these actions. Some students, however, may be interested in determining what the law actually says about vandalism. This is a topic they should be encouraged to research.
2. Some of the chapter titles (such as the first two) seem to connect directly with characters we are introduced to in that chapter. Most of the titles, however, seem pretty obscure and disconnected from the content of the chapters themselves. The pop culture references in most of the chapter titles helps engage modern readers and places the novel in the context of its culture. The running theme of Elvis connects readers on a universal level. Elvis will probably be recognized by every student in class. He is known as the King of Rock and Roll. The idea that Elvis speaks to Gabe regularly introduces a greater idea of unity and the power of music. Elvis has power over Gabe’s life. Although, in reality, Gabe is the one giving him this power.
3. It could be speculated that Gabe’s somewhat conservative family caused him to repress his true identity and sexuality for most of his life. Gabe says that he knew he was a boy when he was in elementary school, but he did not come out until his senior year in high school. When he did this, his parents did not understand and were in the denial of his new identity.
4. Gabe’s family seems like they might fall into the middle class. Money and finances are rarely mentioned. Gabe is encouraged by his parents to get a job, however. They also put a lot of pressure on him to go to college. Gabe remains pretty strong in his decision to not go to a university right away. It is possible that he responded in rejection of his parents’ wishes and was even more convinced that he would not go to college because of their constant pressure. However, Gabe’s decision to attend a community college is not a surprise. In our current society, it is expected that most graduating seniors will attend some sort of college in order to be financially stable in life.
5. This works seems to be pretty true-to-life in its representation of the current LGBT movement. Current literature is becoming increasingly more open and positive toward the representation of the LGBT community. While this book shows a sympathetic view toward the LGBT community, it is also honest about the struggles and reality of living as an trans-teen in our current society.
6. This group puts Gabe, and therefore the LGBT community, in the category of “other.” However, this book serves to empower the group, instead of pushing them farther into a separate category. The Ugly Children Brigade can be seen as creating an “Us vs. Them” mentality between their group and the rest of society. Since they already feel like outcasts, they band together in opposition to the “normal” culture.
7. This novel uses stereotypical characteristics to describe masculinity and femininity. Mara is described as ultra-feminine – she likes to wear pink, bows in her hair, go shopping, etc. Gabe cuts his hair short, wears baggy clothes, and speaks in a deeper voice to characterize himself as male.
8. This novel blurs the lines of sexuality. It causes the reader to question how Gabe would identify. He is attracted to girls, identifies as a male, but is biologically female.