

Title: *Dig*
Author: A. S. King
Genre: Realistic Fiction

Reviewer Name and Grade: Anna P. 8th Grade

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Marla and Gottfried are an older married couple and heads of the family, both miserable with their life and how it's become. The two fell in love and got married young, while they were poor children of potato farmers. Gottfried got rich off of selling and subdividing the family potato land, and alienated the rest of his family. He and Marla went on to have five children, each of whom they cut off from their wealth (implied by Marla's demands). Gottfried is written as sympathetic and quite kind, but tired and unwilling to argue with Marla. Marla, on the other hand, is seen as a strict perfectionist Catholic who believes the next generations are, by her own words, "full of spoiled brats." The couple's lack of financial, and almost emotional support has led to their children's and grandchildren's fall into poverty which Marla attributes to laziness. The story navigates around the couple and their teenaged grandchildren's perspectives in life as their story begins to interweave.

Most of the grandchildren's names are not revealed at first, in keeping with this, the first character we are introduced to is The Shoveler, called that because he always carries around a borrowed shovel for self-proclaimed inexplicable reasons. He moves around the country with his mother for her inability to keep a job. He is resentful towards her as she seems not to act as a mother towards him, calling her self-absorbed. His mother does not tell him who or where his father is. The Freak is a girl who seems to teleport around the globe, but from the realistic aspects of the book we wonder why this is. She is detached from the world, but occasionally interacts with others. Malcom's dad has terminal pancreatic cancer, and Malcom goes on first-class trips to Jamaica with his dad between treatments. Malcom's father starts sending him to live with his grandparents (Marla and Gottfried). Loretta (The Flea Ring-Mistress) is a ninth-grader living in a trailer park with her abusive father and gullible, Christian mother. Her environment is unloving and harsh, and she is hinted to have a mental disorder where she disassociates to talk and be friends with fleas. She imagines the real world as a play, completely disregarding that her father is a bad person or that her mother needs help. To her, it's just a script with actors. CanIHelpYou? Is a character with an alias named after her drive-thru job where she sells drugs under the table. She has trouble with her racist mother and submissive dad, especially when she dates a biracial boy. Her mother is the only child Marla Marla approves of. Jake and Bill are brothers living with their parents. Jake is in highschool and follows his brother's lead, idealizing his older sibling. Bill is and an adult man who mistreats and physically assaults everyone around him (including his entire family) and is implied to be a Nazi or Klan member. He drinks, and encourages his underage (around 17) brother to do the same. As their narrative continues, it is shown that he told Jake to sexually assault a girl, and helped him dispose of the body. Jake wants to turn himself in. Each of the cousins has an interaction with the Freak.

Life begins to change for the family as the story proceeds. Their story crosses paths. Loretta's mother attempts suicide and meets Gottfried in the hospital when he was waiting for Marla to get out of a CAT scan (where Marla had a stroke), and his daughter and granddaughter move in with them and Malcom. The Freak seems to dive more and more into a state of psychosis as she vividly describes her flickering as her "spending months naked wrapped in a burrito of dirt.". Loretta, CanIHelpYou?, the Shoveler, and Malcom

appear at Marla's Easter dinner, and we see them interact for the first time but realize one cousin is missing after her father informs Marla that she - The Freak - has been gone. Malcolm pulls up coordinates he got from a random boy (implied Jake). They drive up to New Jersey, and find her body. Bill is arrested in a police scuffle, and later convicted for The Freak's murder. The story ends with the four cousins back at Marla's house as Gottfried overhears them. They had each had a prior interaction with The Freak when she was supposed to be dead. They remember to love and keep moving forward. The curtain draws to a close.

Did the plot(for fiction) or presentation of information (for non-fiction)keep you interested?

Honestly, at first, I definitely thought the book was quite boring. The perspective of this book changed from character to character, but this actually posed a hindrance to me at first. Some of the characters were either relatable, sympathetic, or interesting, others seemed completely unrealistic or quite frankly annoying. However, towards the end, I definitely got more and more interested in the book. Skimming it when I was writing down the summary, I actually want to read it a second time now that I am fully aware of the context and have analyzed some of the metaphors in the book.

Was the pace of the book too fast,too slow, or just right?

As I mentioned before, I would say that the pacing was very slow at first but picked up to something much faster and more interesting.

What grade level(s)is this book appropriate for?

I would say the book is probably appropriate for grade levels 7 to 12, but with parental confirmation on its readability for all ages. It mentions illicit drug use heavily, and even features common instances of underage tobacco use and alcohol consumption. There are some sexual themes. However, in the context of the book itself, I would say that it was meant to contribute to the larger story and theme of the novel. In this book, an actual plot is somewhat sparse. It does seem to rely on thrusting moral lessons onto the reader, which I don't necessarily agree with as these themes can be heavy-handed at times.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to those not necessarily looking for a riveting story or plot, as there isn't a lot of that in this novel. It mostly circles around describing the lives of the teens, the grandparents, and everyone's perspective on the world. The book can be confusing, and is laden with metaphors. Sometimes it feels as though the author is just writing a rant on her political beliefs and not an actual book. Personally, I'm not a fan of this. The points she makes are valid, but it comes off as almost lazy when the development of the character is ignored in favor of pushing thoughts. But if you are looking for a read into political and moral issues (racism, sexism, guns, even cannabis use), I would say this book is good for that. In contrast, I wouldn't say that this book is good for convincing people on the opposite side of the argument to reconsider their beliefs through the way it handles the topics.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

From my previous statements, one could possibly surmise my warnings to other teenagers about this book. You really have to take into consideration what kind of book you're picking up to enjoy this. Be prepared for very apparent topics to be shown! In addition, I wouldn't say this book is representative of teenagers or their thought process. We don't constantly think about racism and sexism, judging another person because he or she (direct quote), "has no idea she's [or he's] white and the whole world was made for people like her. [or him]" Even I, as a girl, do not constantly complain about the patriarchy or talk about the problem of sexism in this country. I, as a girl who goes to public school, do not think about how (direct quote), "any one of us could get shot and killed by

a classmate.” These are very important topics. However, I don’t think they are presented well in relation to how we actually think and speak, what is mostly on our minds. This book is a great philosophical read, just know that you can’t take this part of the book very seriously. Many of the characters won’t be very relatable, but you have to know that the book was written to focus on the theme and these new characters’ difficult situations as opposed to their personalities.

I would personally rate this book as:

2 stars: I did not like this book but somebody else might.

The reason for my low rating in this situation is because I personally related to one character (The Shoveler for his resilience and kindness), and liked only two of the other main characters (Loretta and Gottfried). The book is described as focusing on “polite, affluent, white supremacy,” which I didn’t agree was the case at all. The topics it covers are essential to our understanding and betterment of humanity, but I don’t think it handled them in a way which was interesting to read as a fictional YA novel. The book was really engaging towards the end and during parts that didn’t explicitly talk about societal issues. In Loretta’s perspective, we see (likely developed) mental disability, poverty, sexism, mental health problems, and other current subjects which are worth thinking about and considering. This part was really emotional, and I felt a flurry of feelings. To add, I even got really attached to Loretta from her happiness in hard times (finding a cute sequined dress in a thrift store and pretending she was a princess) and her outlook on life. There was also character development in her part of the story, despite this being an unfortunately rare if not the only case in the book. Loretta was handled really well, and she only goes to show that you don’t have to exactly say that something needs to change to spark conversation. The end had a plot arc that a lot of the book was missing. This book was not necessarily for me, but my care and intrigue for some of the characters got me to the end which I very much enjoyed.