

Loveboat, Taipei

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Since she was young, all Ever Wong really wanted to do was become a professional dancer. But throughout her life, her parents have always interfered and intercepted with her dream in order to divert her life toward pursuing a medical field. As a Chinese American, she's had to experience numerous and outlandishly strict rules by her traditional parents. So it's almost characteristic when out of nowhere, Ever's whole summer plans are thrown out the window and she's swiftly sent on a 13-hour plane ride to the island of Taiwan. The reason? To attend an expensive eight-week long summer camp for prestigious Asian Americans to learn Chinese culture and language. Despite the camp's intentions to educate, it's secretly well-known by the term "Loveboat", because students often come there to party and hook up. Suddenly, Ever finds herself indulging in a sweet taste of freedom she's never known before and she's instantly determined to break every "Wong Rule" in one summer.

This novel is for readers age 17-25. The book has some mild language and mature suggestive content. There are also drinking, clubbing and nudity. There is also some ableism and scenes of animal cruelty. The book is labeled as more of a coming-of-age story, but nothing offensive is in extremely graphic detail.

I was actually pretty surprised at how this book turned out. Rest assured, the book is far more than just a teenager doing rebellious and risky things. What I love was Ever's transformation as a character. In one specific part of the story, she has a change in mindset of what she wants to accomplish in her summer. It goes from trying to do everything her parents didn't want her to do, to figuring out what *she* wants to do for herself. This interesting new path that she makes for herself is something that never really occurred to me before, even though most teenagers have understood and considered the well-known defiance-against-parental-authority path. I think that instead of posing as a potential dangerous example for teenagers to follow, this book actually highlights a solution to a common inner conflict that many teenagers may relate to, in order to encourage teenagers to think twice about doing something dangerous for the sake of the danger.

Another aspect of the story that I think is worth discussing about is Ever's passion that conflicts with her parents' wishes. This particularly hits home for me and I think many others may have similar conflicts like this as well. Ever starts off being unable to confront her parents about what she wants to do, and it seems that her parents often make big decisions for her like pulling her out of the school dance team, forcing her to apply for medical schools, and sending her off to Taiwan. But over the course of the story, for the first time, Ever is praised and respected for the gift that her parents condemn and she begins to question her choices and perspective of dance. The final climax of the story really highlights her final dramatic embrace to the one thing she's always loved and it really sets the stage for how Ever later approaches her parents in the end, to trust and respect her personal decision. I really love seeing this shift in mindset for Ever as well as the confidence she gains to stand up for herself in the end.

Finally, the last aspect of the story that I really liked was the representation of Asian culture. Growing up in Ohio, Ever has never had much connection and interaction with many Asian American kids like herself. But for the first time, she bonds over her hardships and

difficult experiences as an ethnic minority, with the other people at Loveboat. This sparks some interesting conversations and discussions about combatting stereotypes and trying to speak up about normalized racism that contradicts the “Asian nonconfrontational thing” that Ever talks about. On page 329, Wen writes, “We’re breaking another taboo, talking about racism...But these are rules meant to be broken”. Here and there, there are some small instances of culture-embracing and empowerment that shine really wonderfully in the story. I love how the author wove it in so naturally, while also retaining relevance to the plot.

Overall, this book kind of blew me away. Curiously, the story is based on an actual summer program in Taiwan that became known as “Loveboat”. When I was a child, my parents sent me to summer camps in Taiwan as well, but as far as I know, I think Loveboat is a very exaggerated and extreme depiction of summer camps in Taiwan. Although it’s not exactly accurate in showing actual East Asian Culture itself, the depiction of Asian American culture in the story seems pretty relevant and relatable in my opinion. Anyways, I think this is a great novel in delving in the challenges of growing up, finding your own path and embracing your identity. I would best recommend this for readers who like realistic fiction and romance.

Recommended Titles

American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins

Such a Fun Age by Kiley Reid

Crazy Rich Asians by Kevin Kwan

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

Looking for Alaska by John Green