

The Guardian

Julius Leste

Reviewed by: Alyssa Li, 15

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

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The Guardian introduces readers to main character Ansel, who is a fourteen year old teen living in Davis, Georgia in the 1940s. When he's not working in his family's general mercantile store, he is exploring the woods around town with his best friend Willie (who works for Ansel's father Bert). Their friendship is essential to the story, as Willie is black and Ansel's father Bert is a white supremacist who has degrading beliefs about African Americans. In contrast, Ansel's mother Maureen is repulsed by her husband's beliefs. She mostly remains complacent as these beliefs are the norm at the time but as the story progresses, she fears her husband's influence on her son may go too far and attempts to bring Ansel out of their small town.

However, before Ansel leaves Davis, he witnesses a series of events that will forever change him. He first sees Mary Anne, the preacher's daughter and a neighbour who he is in love with, sexually assaulted multiple times by Zeph, the brutal heir of a local planter. When Ansel and his father find her murdered in church, Willie's father is blamed for the crime. Despite Ansel knowing the truth, he does not speak up. The impact is permanent -- for the rest of his life, Ansel grapples with the guilt and trauma at being a bystander and not defending the innocent.

This novel is quite short, being only under 130 pages long. However, the story unpacked within those pages is undoubtedly unforgettable. Firstly, the setting of the novel is very interesting. The town of Davis is very racist, with many residents enriching themselves from cotton plantations staffed by slaves. Ansel, his mother and a fellow neighbour Esther Davis (a member of the richest and most racist family in town) are the only exceptions to this. Esther provides food to older slaves who are struggling to continue cotton picking and also medical support to assaulted black slaves, who typically are female and have been raped by her nephew Zeph. These two characters serve as great contrasts to the rest of the society who hold repugnant beliefs about African Americans. Through their interactions, author Julius Lester shows readers what this period of history was like. He also quantifies it through statistics at the back of the book on the lynching percentages for all 48 states between 1882 and 1968.

The topic of this novel is essential reading, particularly for current day. Despite being nearly a century later, the prejudiced mindsets described in the novel still contribute to systemic issues of racism today. The impacts of slavery also remain to this day. I would recommend this for readers to purchase but keep in mind the age of readers. The content in this book is very mature and can be disturbing at many points. Trigger warnings in particular may be necessary for

some readers in sections about a teen girl getting violently sexually assaulted. Overall, the reading age for this novel should be 14+.

Recommended Titles:

Stella by Starlight by Sharon M. Draper

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee