

Sparkle in the Wreckage



Is there any going back once a world has become a dystopia? That's what I kept wondering as I read my first two books from the new batch of Rosie Award nominees. Libba Bray's Beauty Queens is set in the near future and concerns thirteen survivors of a plane crash on a tropical island. They also just happen to be contestants in the Miss Teen Dream beauty contest, sponsored by The Corporation, a company whose ubiquity in media and the marketplace make them a not-unfamiliar behind-the-scenes corporate dictatorship. Divergent, by Veronica Roth, is set in a much less-familiar future Chicago.

It's a country that decided to split everyone into five factions dedicated to unique ways of life: knowledge-seeking, truth-speaking, philanthropy, etc. Teens are forced to choose and undergo training for their factions, often training that either kills them or forces them out into the world of the "factionless."

Both of these books focus on female teen characters attempting to overcome the limitations of the world in which they live. In the case of Beauty Queens, it is the physical objectification of women and corporate control through passive consumption of media and beauty products. Once the young women are cut off on their island, they begin to challenge their roles. I really wanted to like this book: it has a strong message and is often laugh-until-you-snort funny. But often times it feels like it is too much about the message and too little about the story, and suffers from sloppy writing in the last third of the book. The beauty queens in Bray's dystopia take a Lord of the Flies situation and make it into a utopia, but the end result seems too neat to be believable. Still, it's a thoughtful read and worth the time, especially if you've been bitten by the reality TV bug.

Divergent is a much grittier (and more subtle) take on a young woman challenging her assigned place in the world. In this case, Tris is rebelling against the faction system, choosing the thrill-seeking Dauntless faction over the selfless Abnegation faction she was born into. Women in Roth's dystopia aren't objectified in the same way they are in real life, and it is this fact that made me wonder if the terrible danger and secret police state of Divergent, as awful as they are, don't offer women in the book a more equal chance to improve their situations. Tris is the hero of this book, and ends up saving more than one man's life, but it's a role-reversal that is nowhere near as heavy-handed as in Beauty Queens. Quick-paced, with plenty of trials and tests to keep Hunger Games fans happy, Divergent offers a glimmer of hope in a decayed and corrupt world. Bray has written a number of other books, including the Gemma Doyle Trilogy (A Great and Terrible Beauty, Rebel Angels, and The Sweet Far Thing) that examines young girls' places in Victorian society in a fantasy setting. For a darker take on gender roles and female bonding, try Daisy Whitney's The Mockingbirds, or Megan McCafferty's Bumped, a sci-fi look at women and motherhood. Roth has written a sequel to Divergent (Insurgent) and will publish a final volume, Allegiant, in October 2013. Gender roles and essential human qualities that transcend gender are examined in the dark and brilliant sci-fi trilogy of Chaos Walking by Patrick Ness (starting with The Knife of Never Letting Go). Love and happiness (and whether the two can co-exist) are the subject of Lauren Oliver's Delirium. All of these titles examine worlds in which teens, and especially teen girls, are restricted in or confined to certain roles, and must fight for the right to make their own decisions.

Posted by Chris H. on May 3, 2013

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