

Azaleas Don't Bloom Here

Frank T. Klus

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A dystopian future in which ideas are policed and mind control is possible is at the center of this action-packed story.

Portraying a dystopian America in rapid decline, Frank T. Klus's *Azaleas Don't Bloom Here* is a tale of psychological manipulation and escape from torture.

Eugene Sulke is one of the lucky ones: while the rest of Chicago suffers dire poverty and oppression under the rule of various heavy-handed militias, he has a job, a house, and plenty of food on the table. But when his progressive political views make him a target for a local strongman, Eugene learns that the stability of his life was an illusion. Robbed of everything important, he must escape to the isolated nation of New America or die trying.

The book is action-oriented, detailing many kidnappings, escapes, and chases. Occasionally, it lingers on action or torture scenes rather than advancing the plot. The result is a story that can feel slow and repetitive, and it is easy to lose track of ambushes and surveillance episodes. However, a significant plot twist near the book's conclusion helps to tie everything together, and the reading experience is ultimately satisfying.

The rebels who assist Eugene are portrayed as politically progressive liberals acting diametrically against the conservative militias. In fact, the book features several monologues detailing progressive positions and describing their advantages. These sometimes seem staged and contribute to the sense that the book has a political tilt. The book's portrayal of conservative militias as ruthless, violent gangs who use mind control and torture to maintain power may rub some real-life conservatives the wrong way.

Medical torture represents a strong sub-theme in the story, affecting nearly every major character at some time or another. The "treatment" employed by the antagonistic militia has a psychological flavor and is meant to change an individual's memories and personality. The existence of mind control and torture within the book calls the very idea of "bad guys" into question: which characters are truly antagonists acting of their own free will? Which are victims of mental tampering? This concept adds a layer of complexity to the story which enhances it greatly.

Dialogue can be clunky throughout the book, but not to the extent that it obscures meaning or impedes enjoyment. Both Eugene and his love interest, Sandra, engage in character arcs of self-discovery that are interesting and entertaining. However, now and then, various characters act in ways that don't make sense. This is particularly true in the case of a violent rape scene, after which the victim chats and laughs lightheartedly. Full enjoyment of this book requires glossing over these occasional rough spots.

Adult fans of dystopian novels will enjoy this book, especially those politically in line with its leanings. However, avoid giving *Azaleas Don't Bloom Here* to teens or cataloging it as a young adult novel, as scenes of torture and sexual abuse may not be appropriate for persons under the age of eighteen.

ANNA CALL (May 27, 2016)

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