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Young Adult Fiction

Eggplant Alley
D. M. Cataneo
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This coming-of-age story, set in the Vietnam era, does not pander or condescend to young adults.

A young Italian American comes of age in the Vietnam era, striving to find his place and peace of mind with his family and peers in a tough Bronx neighborhood.

It's not often you find the terms "simplistic," "epic," and "poignant" as relevant descriptors of a single book, let alone one for young adults. Yet D. M. Cataneo's *Eggplant Alley* succeeds masterfully in its portrayal of a young person struggling to find his place, at a time that could be equally celebratory and devastating.

Young Nicola "Nicky" Martini is entering his teens in the neighborhood of Eggplant Alley in the Bronx. His brother has been served his draft papers and is off to Vietnam but only to ride a desk. His old-school father and mother bitterly work and try to discipline Nicky with varying degrees of success. But his mind and desire for friendship takes him into the streets of his neighborhood, complete with bigoted gangs, free thinking hippie girls, and the possibility for injury or insult around every corner.

Cataneo's long narrative—over three hundred pages—allows young people to relate to Nicky without feeling they are being pandered to. Slightly cynical-sounding chapter titles like "The Third Thing that Ruined Nicky's Childhood," and the brother of Nicky's brother's girlfriend chastising Nicky for peering in on his marijuana operation, give *Eggplant Alley* added verisimilitude and humor all in one. The prose is lean and structured with short sentences, compelling the reader, page after page, with ease. There are scenes of old-school youth activities in New York, like playing stick-ball, hurling water balloons from a roof, and having all the kids with nicknames that end with a "Y" (Nicky, Icky, etc.)—none of which come off as overtly sentimentalized.

Beyond its more specific qualities, *Eggplant Alley* benefits from one key factor overall: it refuses to treat its young readers as fools. Occasionally the dialogue seems a bit dated, but the subjects of hippie versus square, war versus peace, and the individuality of youth versus the hypocritical collectivism of an adult world makes for a truly nourishing adventure for a young person's mind. There are no love-tormented teenage vampires or vigilant dwarfs, just people struggling day-to-day in very turbulent times. *Eggplant Alley* goes the distance to deliver a narrative that adults would admire in their own fiction, and one that youngsters can enjoy without feeling condescended.

James Burt