



Norphoria Jones: A.K.A. NO

Pamela F. Jones Gatewood

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Nobody messes with NO, the title character in Pamela F. Jones Gatewood's debut novel about African-American teens, *Norphoria Jones A.K.A. NO*. In 2008 Los Angeles, NO and her two best friends, Lil Mama and Joker, rule West Cali High. Known collectively as The Trio, the girls also have the attention of a handful of loyal teenage boys who lust after NO and her girlfriends. As NO's senior year begins, a threat to Norphoria's world looms on the horizon. Lonely, ambitious new student Teka Watts covets NO's status. She schemes to oust a member of The Trio and take her place.

Gatewood excels at portraying the vicious social hell that high school can be for girls who seek to obtain and keep popularity. Nuanced main characters of NO, Lil Mama, Joker, and Teka remain multifaceted even as they commit deplorable acts, because readers glimpse the complex motivations for their behaviors. Additionally, the author captures with finesse both the easy and the difficult makeups and breakups that happen within a group of young adult friends. Her use of urban teenage slang makes the story ring true. Moreover, at a time when it is common to write about pregnant teenage mothers being abandoned by their baby's fathers, it is refreshing, although a bit unbelievable, to see NO and her boyfriend get married when she becomes pregnant. For Presley, this is no shotgun wedding. He loves NO, and it is important for him to do right by her.

The book falters, however, when NO and her posse plan and execute a brutal assault on Teka in front of cameras. Characters (and the narrators) say that Teka deserves such vicious treatment because she tried to destabilize The Trio. Meanwhile, NO and her crew essentially get away with their crimes by claiming Teka brought the attack upon herself with her belligerent behavior.

When the Trio describes their actions to others—adults and peers—the others say Teka deserves her fate because of her aggressive behavior prior to the attack, which is a version of the “she was asking for it by dressing provocatively” accusation. The attack involves drugging, beating, then raping Teka. The Trio admits to the attack and everyone lauds the violence; the girls face no negative social or legal consequences. Other characters actually commend their behavior.

The story's apparent approval of rape sends the wrong message to the book's intended audience of teenage girls. Also inappropriate for teens, the sex scenes between NO and her suitors, with the author's graphic descriptions of body parts and orgasms, seem more at home in erotica. To top it off, the intrusion of a first-person narrator in a mostly third-person omniscient narrative, along with the inclusion of a redundant introduction in which Gatewood essentially summarizes the novel, stalls the plot even further.

As a final misstep, the cover depicts three girls whose race it is impossible to discern; indeed, the blurry photos seem to be of Caucasian teens. For a story in which the characters are African Americans, a cover that depicts girls of another race does the book no favors. A gem of a story exists here, buried under outlandish plot devices, dubious morality, and narrative hiccups.

JILL ALLEN (April 16, 2013)

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