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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Rebels by Accident

Patricia Dunn
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When sixteen-year-old Mariam and her best friend, Deanna, are sent to Egypt for an extended visit with Mariam's sittu (grandmother), Mariam's concerns are mainly how bored she'll be and that she can't speak Arabic. However, when political protests shake the entire country, the circumstances the girls face challenge them in ways that will change them forever.

As a Muslim teen in America, Mariam is a generally underrepresented figure in popular young adult books, and a welcome addition. Mariam's emotional journey is poignant and true-to-life. Like many teens, she struggles to see herself in a positive light, especially given her insecurities about being an Egyptian American. This vulnerability will speak to readers. Though she cares deeply for her parents, she also pushes the boundaries of their rules and desperately wants more freedom. Her family relationship honestly reflects a common strain that many teens will understand. The Mariam at the end of the book is very much a different person, and though the changes happen rather quickly, they are gratifying to see.

As Mariam spends some time in Egypt and comes to understand her heritage. she, like readers, will start to appreciate both modern-day and ancient Egypt. Dunn's references to Egyptian malls, restaurants, and present-day culture paint a more realistic portrait of a country that is often viewed on a superficial level. Through this book, readers have the opportunity to really open their eyes and connect with a fascinating place half a world away.

The real political struggles Egypt has faced in the last few years are dealt with head-on as the girls learn about and become involved in the protests against President Mubarak. Dunn doesn't shy away from the sad fact that there was much violence and fear during the protests. She has the girls make friends with a variety of young people who help convey the spirit and reasoning behind the protests. The book could be a great learning opportunity in classrooms, and has the potential to spark an interest in important current events.

Where Dunn falters is when she forces unnecessary lighter elements into her story. The girls' preoccupation with romance could be seen as simply trying to portray more realistic characters or to balance the heavier elements. Whatever the reason, this aspect feels incredibly contrived and cliched. Perhaps if the romance was a smaller part of the novel, it would be another realistic touch, but instead it detracts from the story and undermines the girls' development. Dunn also stretches believability in a few cases to move the story along, but this is forgivable considering how smoothly the story generally flows.

Rebels by Accident offers a solid, interesting choice for teens looking for depth and realism.
ALICIA SONDHI (November 26, 2012)

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