Clarion Review

Young Adult Fiction

Strength and Justice: Side: Strength
Adrem Kay
CreateSpace
Softcover $9.99 (284pp)
978-1-4636-6954-6
★★★★★
(Jun 26, 2012)

Strength & Justice: Side: Strength, a dazzling debut by a pair writing and illustrating under the pen name of Adrem Kay, presents a thrilling world that is sure to captivate readers. In the distant future, where humans have magical powers called “dynas” and teenagers can be junior police cadets, fifteen-year-olds Jeremy Istsubishi and his girlfriend, Mandy Gabor, work as DANDY LIONS, part of the law enforcement in their home of Germinate City. DANDY LIONS is the youth arm of DANDY, the adult corps of police officers in the city.

Jeremy, Mandy, and their cohorts are investigating a mysterious phenomenon. Lately, citizens have been getting sick, losing their dynas, and then going crazy before dying. DANDY’s quest to stop the illness is hampered by the fact that agents can’t figure out its cause or how it spreads. As those close to Jeremy become affected, he is faced with solving the mystery before pandemonium breaks out.

Through skillful world-building and deft characterization, Kay pulls readers into Jeremy’s life, which is just odd enough to be fascinating, but familiar enough to be relatable. While young undercover cops, citizens with superpowers, and the Japanese flavor are unfamiliar to most, girlfriend problems, teen angst, and familial discord are universal. Kay skillfully integrates the supernatural into the quotidian so that even the strangest aspects of Germinate City seem normal. Fans of comic-book superheroes and magic alike will enjoy the ingenious specificity of each dyna. For example, one character controls plants, while another has a knack for creating white elephants.

The characterizations also shine; not only are Mandy and Jeremy completely fleshed out, but Mandy’s younger sister and even their history teacher are as well. Mandy and Jeremy’s

romance has the cutesiness typical of young love, but the characters are also capable of being savvy and serious. In a twist sure to please girls, Mandy remains levelheaded while Jeremy bumbles along. Refreshingly, too, Jeremy befriends Mandy's sister without the formation of a love triangle or Mandy becoming jealous.

The plot moves at an ideal pace—slow enough for the audience to keep track of new developments, yet fast enough to keep readers interested. As characters keep getting sick and detectives fail to find a cure, the illness provides an apt metaphor for AIDS and other diseases of the present day, or even threats like global warming. Fans of anime will appreciate how Adrem Kay blends East and West by drawing the illustrations in a style typical of the genre.

East also meets West in the way Kay sneaks Japanese terms and concepts into the story while providing enough clues to explain them. Jeremy identifies strongly with his Japanese ancestry, and even though this is not a prominent aspect of the book, his heritage allows readers from many different backgrounds to identify with him. *Strength & Justice: Side: Strength* is a first-rate debut.

Jill Allen