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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Sykosa Part 1: Junior Year

Justin Ordonez
TDS Publishing
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Justin Ordonez's debut novel, *Sykosa Part 1: Junior Year*, disproves the old saw that youth is wasted on the young. He adroitly delves into the minds and social lives of his titular sixteen-year-old protagonist and her peers, showing that young people wrestle with tough decisions just like adults do. While Sykosa does not think of her youth as wasted, she struggles to make sense of her past and present, who she is and who she wants to be, and how much she controls her own destiny.

Asian-Americans in a mostly Caucasian area of Washington, childhood friends Sykosa and Niko have always stuck together. Now, they enjoy status in an elite high school clique, the Queens. Lately, though, Sykosa notices that Niko has changed, and she wonders what to do about it. Meanwhile, Niko will stop at nothing to achieve her goals, even as her ideas of what she desires are mutable. Sykosa has an emotionally charged rapport with her parents, who want her to be class valedictorian. Additionally, her testosterone-fueled Caucasian boyfriend, Tom, finds himself torn between wanting to respect Sykosa's wishes and figuring out how he can get her to agree to have sex with him.

Ordonez expertly captures the inner worlds of both genders with ease. Questions such as What should I wear to look sexy? and Is she still my friend? vie for prominence in his characters' minds with Oh, my God, I'm so horny, and How do I get her to notice me? He accurately depicts their moment-to-moment vacillations between confidence and uncertainty. The major and minor players represent complex human beings with intricate motivations. Ordonez also pinpoints the essence of "mean girls" with his insightful treatment of how Niko's fair-weather friendship affects Sykosa. The protagonist's Japanese-American heritage inflects her interactions with her parents and produces some racist remarks from her Caucasian peers.

While the author's frank treatment of under-age drinking, sexual activities, viewing of pornography, and swearing may offend some readers, these elements are included for realism, not shock value. *Sykosa* will appeal to girls sixteen and up who appreciate stories in which characters deal with everyday dramas.

Despite its juicy plot, the novel's narrative structure can be confusing. The author shifts viewpoints between the characters and an omniscient narrator without warning. Additionally, Sykosa's thoughts are always italicized, while others' inner dialogue is not.

Readers who take the time to get used to *Sykosa's* narrative quirks will be rewarded with a spot-on portrayal of adolescence.

JILL ALLEN (March 26, 2012)

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