

Toxic Fr.O.G.

Richard Roach

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Toxic Fr.O.G. is an inspiring coming-of-age novel whose heroine immerses herself in science, diverse cultures, and a deep friendship.

In Richard Roach's heartwarming coming-of-age novel *Toxic Fr.O.G.*, a once awkward young woman becomes a scientist while dealing with cultural differences, racial justice, and social acceptance.

Francine Olivière Gagner—who goes by Frog because of her initials and her adoration of the amphibian—is a French and Native American student living in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She and her Potawatomie friend, Melonee, survive a racist attack, after which they begin taking tae kwon do lessons.

Frog spends the summer between her junior and senior years under the watchful eye of her overbearing mother, hopeful that if she and Melonee tutor each other in their weak subjects, she will be able to attend college and study frog toxins. Later, the girls attend college and are given opportunities to study their subjects elsewhere: Melonee in Minnesota with a Native American community, and Frog in South America.

Frog is integrated into an Indigenous tribe, the Wayana, and learns about plant and animal toxins from a shaman. When Melonee and Frog return to Michigan, they are changed women. They are well-rounded, educated individuals who can be proud of their decisions.

The book spans a long period of time, from Frog's junior year of high school through college. Its epilogue takes place years later. Still, it moves at a nimble, even pace, detailing significant scenes and not dwelling on sections of time in which little happens. Whether Frog is deep in the Amazon or at home with her family, each scene contributes, and drama is always around the corner.

Frog is an appealing lead: she exudes confidence and cares about the well-being of her friends and family. Her hyperesthesia, a condition that her doctors are prone to confuse with an Asperger's diagnosis, makes her charming, and its symptoms (she hates the texture of certain foods, finds clothes tight or itchy, and becomes frustrated by loud noises) manifest in endearing ways, as with her preferring to be naked at home as often as possible and enthusing about the intricacies of biochemistry whenever someone shows interest.

Though sometimes awkward, the dialogue helps to develop characters further. Conversations between Frog and Melonee are sturdy and supportive, while the tense nature of Frog's relationship with her mother is shown through her mother's terse words and articulations that Frog is not the daughter she expected or wanted. Their relationship evolves over the course of the book, though their difficulties are never wholly resolved.

The obstacles Frog faces are handled in quick, unrealistic ways, as when two high school bullies meet a tragic end. But Native American, French Canadian, and Wayana cultures are presented in immersive ways, and Frog's slow acceptance into the Wayana tribe happens because of her respectful observance of their cultural practices that emphasize the book's message of cooperation and respect.

Toxic Fr.O.G. is an inspiring coming-of-age novel whose heroine immerses herself in science, diverse cultures, and a deep friendship, achieving personal success because of these cornerstones.

AIMEE JODOIN (October 29, 2020)

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