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English 112B

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September 21st, 2020

Book Talk: *Hero* by Alethea Kontis

1. About the Author



Alethea Kontis is a *New York Times* bestselling author who identifies as a princess, storm chaser, voice actress, and Saturday Songwriter. She is most notably known for her creation of the world Arilland, but she has dabbled in creating various other fantastic worlds as well. The book I chose, *Hero*, is actually a companion novel to her more famous *Enchanted* fairy tale novel that won both the Gelett Burgess Children’s Book Award and Garden State Teen Book award. *Hero* is one of many books in Kontis’ *Enchanted* fairy tale world.

Her website: <http://aletheakontis.com/>

1. Summary of the Novel



Saturday, the novel’s protagonist, is a Woodcutter to the core. She doesn’t wear dresses, has never thought of love, and spends most of her time hanging out with her family in the woods cutting down trees. Saturday is a tomboy figure, preferring the rough and tough over the frilly or sensitive. She is depicted as being far too tall, too strong, and much too normal, unlike the rest of her family. At least, she was normal until she woke up one day, attempted to keep her brother from running away, and used earth-breaking magic. Convinced she killed her brother using her new earth-breaking magic, Saturday ventures off to find him and is instead captured by an evil demon-witch that lives in the farthest mountain peak to the north. Faced with impossible tasks, Saturday has to live up to her destiny and face the evil witch before horrible things happen. Along the way, Saturday makes friends with the others that are being held captive by the witch as well.

1. Significant Passages

**Quote #1:**

“Without her gift, Saturday was just an overly tall girl with overly large hands and an overly loud mouth. She wasn’t even useful anymore. Since Friday’s needle had healed a goose that laid golden eggs, Papa didn’t have to go into the wood as often, which mean Saturday and Peter now had days off. Who had ever heard of days off? Saturday used this idle time to come to the Royal Guards’ training grounds to be yelled at and told how lazy she was. It’s not like she had anything else to do” (Kontis, pg. 5).

**Analysis:**

A reoccurring issue throughout the novel is that Saturday leans too heavily on her magical item. Since Saturday doesn’t seem to have any innate magical qualities, she uses this magical item as her way of proving her usefulness and abilities. This is a bad thing for Saturday because she underestimates her own individual power by only relying on her item. This passage also highlights how different Saturday feels from her magical siblings because she is what is considered ‘normal’. She is a very determined girl who is always trying to be strong enough to help those around her and that can be seen by her confusion with the idea of a day off. She even refers to herself as useless because she cannot help her family anymore in the only way she knew how. This highlights Saturday’s need for self-reflection and growth so she can feel her worth outside of what she can do for her family.

**Quote #2:**

“Saturday inhaled and felt the power from the cauldron-clouds enter her body. Her bones became iron in the head of the forge. Lightning shot from her fingers. The blue-green bracelet at her wrist burned with an inner fire…. The hungry screams from the world beyond had been silenced. In the aftermath, Saturday only heard her ragged breaths and the stubborn beat of her defiant heart. She was glad there was no one to witness her tears” (Kontis, pg. 220-221).

**Analysis:**

 All alone, Saturday has to muster the courage, confidence, and inner strength to do things she never thought she was capable of. However, this time, she has the support of her family helping her through the bracelet that she wears. Saturday’s will to live another day and to save those around her that she loves fuels her to do what she needs to, even without her trusted magical sword that she believed she needed. She has proved her worth to herself without relying on something outside of herself, but now she is faced with the emotions that accompany the trauma she has been through. Saturday still suffers a loss and this particular scene kickstarts the following process of coming to terms with those feelings.

**Quote #3:**

“I look forward to hearing the new tales, once word gets out about the witch and the mountain and all,” he went on. “Instead of batting their eyes at idiots, young girls will start taking up stick swords to slay a dragon and save the prince.” He chuckled at the idea. “Yes, I do look forward to that” (Kontis, pg. 272).

**Analysis:**

This quote is said by a secondary character, Wolf, it’s directed towards Saturday about her adventuring. This passage touches on one of the more important themes in this novel. There are several instances throughout the novel that show a blurred line between genders and gender roles. Saturday is shown as the brave, masculine figure who swoops in and saves her prince, who was transformed into a woman for most of the story. Saturday is built up to be a strong character who breaks stereotypes and who can hopefully inspire others to do so as well. She’s a good role model for both boys and girls. The passage highlights the importance of motivating future listeners of the story to act as brave, strong, and independent like Saturday despite societal norms or restrictions. It also normalizes love between all kinds of people, which is shown through the relationship between a masculine Saturday and her feminine partner.

1. Writing Style and Category

Alethea Kontis sticks to a primarily narrative writing style. Although she periodically uses descriptive writing with short couplets, she focuses mainly on conveying the story with a clear beginning, characters, dialog, conflict, and conflict resolution. There is a set timeline and sequence of events that are staple characteristics of narrative writing, which most of her novels seem to adhere to. From what I gathered in this novel, there is a clear storyline and set plot points that can be followed throughout the novel with little deviation.

 The categories that are covered in the novel from *Adolescents in the Search For meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* are Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival, and Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable. The novel emphasizes gender fluidity by giving the main character, Saturday, very masculine characteristics and traits while also giving her partner, Peregrine, very feminine characterizes and traits. There is a swapping of gender roles as well. Saturday acts as the ‘knight in shining armor’ that comes in and saves Peregrine from his imprisonment upon the mountain. Courage and survival are also major themes in this novel. Saturday must make a difficult decision in order to make if off the mountain that includes summoning the courage to kill the witch to ensure everyone’s survival. She has to plan, take action, and execute the plan, which requires a lot of bravery. Then she has to deal with the feelings associated with her decision afterwards. I feel like the fantasy in this story is a good tool for helping young readers see opportunities as ways of building character because it makes this world feel almost limitless. Saturday’s relationships with her various family members show different sides of sibling rivalry and familial compassion. There are good examples for young readers to pull from and apply to their own lives and families in this novel.

1. Test Complexity

The Flesch Reading Ease: 68.7 (90-100 is very easy)

 Scored: standard/average

Gunning Fog: 11.7

 Scored: hard to read

Flesch-Kincaid: 8.6

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: Ninth Grade

The Coleman-Liau Index: 8

 Grade Level: Eighth Grade

The SMOG Index: 8.7

 Grade Level: Ninth Grade

Readability Index: 9.1

Reading Level: standard/average

Grade Level: Eighth and Ninth Grade (13-15 years old)

 For the most part, I agree with the analysis that the various formulas produced. The vocabulary used in this is novel is fairly simple; I feel there are only a handful of times that any sort of definition would be needed for the vocabulary. Kontis has a unique writing style—rather than explaining a lot of the relationships between characters, she throws the reader into the text and gives a lot of information in the beginning. A higher-grade level would be necessary for remembering the relationships and drops of world building information, but the straightforward nature of the text makes it easy to pick up the plot and everything without needing to remember all of the familial relationships. There are a lot of characters to juggle in this story, each with their own purpose, but a majority of them only show up in the first 30% of the book and the last 5% of the book. Because of this, the lessons taught to the reader through these characters is very obvious and is usually communicated directly to the main character, Saturday, as she learns them as well. I believe this has its upsides and downsides, but overall, I believe that it can be a useful experience for students that don’t necessarily have the tools to give certain situations a lot of critical thought.

For example, the scene where Saturday is forgiving her brother for causing her all the trouble is only about a page long and it’s obvious from Kontis’ description that there was a lesson learned about forgiveness. It was short and sweet. Yet it takes a while for the world building to feel present. I think this would also deter a lot of older readers who might be searching for a deeper, more complex world from getting invested in the book. It isn’t until the characters are exploring the mountain that the setting is really described. Otherwise, I think the prose is very straight forward and easy to follow, particularly for the middle school age range. I don’t think the emotions or lessons taught in the novel are very difficult to navigate.

As far as maturity needed to approach this novel, I disagree with the Test Complexity results. It says that 13-15 years old is the appropriate age range, but I think that the story could be easy enough to follow for a 11 or 12-year-old as well. There is limited sexual intimacy involved except for kissing and an almost-nude scene.

1. Why teens should read this book

**It goes against gender stereotypes and norms.** Teens growing up today are exposed to a much more diverse, accepting environment. The topic of gender identity is something that a lot of young people want to know more about and there are teens that want to see themselves represented in more admirable characters. This novel breaks conventional gender norms by having a female main character that is masculine and who doesn’t approve of wearing the traditionally feminine clothing rescue her feminine male partner from a metaphorical tower.

**It encourages the reader to believe in their abilities.** Saturday learns throughout the novel, and therefore teaches the reader, that she is strong enough to do the unthinkable regardless of what external resources she has. Through determination and bravery, she is able to save her family and friends.

**It empowers women/girls.** Teens, particularly girls, growing up in a patriarchal society need strong female characters to look up to in order to see examples of excellence that resemble themselves. This goes for boys, too. This novel has good messaging for boys too so that they can see examples of respectable and strong women accomplishing difficult things.