Monique Perez-Durand

Dr. Warner

24 October 2022

English 112B Section 1

***A Northern Light***



Image Source: https://www.booksource.com/Products/Northern-Light--A\_\_9780358063681.aspx

****

Image Source: https://www.rochester.edu/pr/Review/V73N3/0403\_donnelly.html

**About Jennifer Donnelly**

Jennifer Donnelly is an author of adult and young adult novels such as *A Northern Light* and has won at least 6 awards for *A Northern Light*. She graduated from the University of Rochester and currently lives in Upstate New York as a full-time writer. Many of her books are faerie tales with witches and evil queens, drawing inspiration from the Grimm Brothers. Donnelly has also written several historical fiction books requiring her to dig into history’s crevices in order to understand who these characters might have been, how they might have behaved, and how they might have lived.

Author Website and Second Source:

<https://www.jenniferdonnelly.com/2020/12/21/how-i-made-mattie/>

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/42182/jennifer-donnelly/>

**Book Summary**

*A Northern Light* is a historical fiction novel about 16-year-old Mattie Gokey in 1906. Her mother died and her brother left the family farm, so Mattie assumes the roles they left behind. She feels anchored at home but she dreams of going to college in New York and studying English. Almost everyone tells her her dreams are foolish and selfish. Mattie begins to agree. Young and unsure, she considers staying in Big Moose Lake, marrying Royal Loomis, and beginning a family of her own.

Set against the backdrop of murder, the novel alternates between flashbacks and the present, when Mattie is working at the Glenmore hotel saving money. At the Glenmore, she is troubled by letters left to her by a girl found drowned in the lake. Already torn between her family and her dreams, Mattie is running out of time to decide what to do with the incriminating letters.

**Book Quotes**

| **Quote from page 22**“You’re to stay home and help me boil tomorrow. Your sisters, too." "Pa, I can't. I'll fall behind if I miss a day, and my examinations are coming up.""Cows can't eat learning, Mattie. I need to buy hay. Used up most everything I cut last fall. Fred Becker don't take credit, so I'll need to sell some syrup to get it."I started to argue, but Pa looked up from his bowl and I knew to stop. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You're lucky you're going at all this year," he said. "And it's only because the notion of you getting your diploma" -it came out French-sounding, dee-plo-MA, as his words do when he's angry- "meant something to your mother. You won't be going next year. I can't run this place by myself."I looked at the table. I was angry with my father for keeping me home, even for a day, but he was right. |
| --- |
| **Analysis and Importance**This is an important quote from the beginning of the novel that showcases much of the opposition Mattie is facing. Her father offers her zero support or empathy. He knows how badly his daughter wants to attend school but he only lets her do so when it does not inconvenience him and because his dead wife would have wanted her to continue school. Still, he does not support her and even looks at her situation as if he is doing her the favor. This passage also exemplifies where Mattie's heart is. She is not someone who considers her own needs or wants very often. Mattie wants to go and is obviously disappointed about being told to stay home, but she reasons that her father is right. Since her mother died and her brother left, she has assumed a new sense of responsibility on the farm. She is angry about not going to school but feels an even greater sense of obligation to her familial responsibilities, forcing her to put her dreams on the back burner. It is unfortunate that her father is unable to empathize with his daughter's dreams which leads them to a relationship of distance and a lack of communication. |

| **Quote from page 38**Being the malignant weasel that he is, he kept hold of [composition book of stories] and he waited. And then Miss Parrish's mother took ill and she left to go to Boonville and nurse her, and the school trustees got Miss Wilcox, who was renting the old Foster camp in Inlet, to take her place. And Weaver gave Miss Wilcox my composition book without even telling me. And she read my stories and told me I had a gift."A true gift, Mattie," she'd said. "A rare one." And ever since, because of the two of them, Weaver and Miss Wilcox both, I am wanting things I have no business wanting, and what they call a gift seems to me more like a burden. |
| --- |
| **Analysis and Importance**This quote is important because it proves that Mattie is not without support. There are people in her life, Weaver and Miss Wilcox especially, who want her to pursue her dream and who genuinely believe in her. Even with their unwavering support and encouragement, the discouraging voices in her life, her father, her aunt, her younger sisters, her love interest Royal, and her old teacher are far more influential. Their negativity has much more impact on her confidence than the few voices that are telling her she is amazing. The last sentence shows how her self-confidence is dwindling and she is beginning to accept that she must be selfless. Her ambitions are too selfish to pursue.  |

| **Quote from pages 207-209**I'd borrowed the volumes of poetry on Saturday, when I'd gone back to Miss Wilcox's house to start organizing her books. "You can keep this one, Mattie," she'd said about the Baxter, "but keep it to yourself." I didn't need telling. I'd heard all about A Distant Music. I'd read articles about it in Aunt Josie's cast-off news papers. They said that Emily Baxter was "an affront to common decency," "a blight on American womanhood,” and "an insult to all proper feminine sensibilities. It had been banned by the Catholic Church and publicly burned in Boston.I thought there would be curse words in it for sure, or dirty pictures or something just god-awfully terrible, but they weren't-only poems. One was about a young woman who gets an apartment in a city by herself and eats her first supper in it all But it wasn't sad, not one bit. Another was about a mother with six children, who finds out she's got a seventh coming and gets so low spirited, she hangs herself. One was about Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, setting fire to her loom and heading off to do some traveling herself. And one was about God being a woman instead of a man. That must've been the one that made the pope boiling mad.Jeezum... What if God *was* a woman? Would the pope be out of a job? Would the president be a woman, too? And the governor? And the sheriff? And when people got married, would the man have to honor and obey? Would only women be allowed to vote?Emily Baxter's poems made my head hurt. They made me think of so many questions and possibilities. Reading one was like pulling a stump. You got hold of a root and tugged, hoping it would come right up, but sometimes it went so deep and so far, you were halfway to the Loomis farm and still pulling.I took a deep breath. I smelled wet earth and evergreens and the dusk coming down, and they calmed me some. I was agitated something fierce. There was a whole other world beyond Eagle Bay, with people like Emily Baxter in it, thinking all the things you thought but weren't supposed to. Writing them, too. And when I read what they'd wrote, I wanted to be in that world. Even if it meant I had to leave this one. And my sisters. And my friends. And Royal. |
| --- |
| **Analysis and Importance**This quote dives into Mattie's mind, what she is feeling, how she thinks, and what she truly enjoys when people are not around to influence her, judge her, guilt her, or persuade her in any way. Emily Baxter is an idol because she is a woman who says and does what she wants despite how society attempts to shove her into a box. Mattie feels the same pressure. So few people truly care about her opinion, but reading Emily Baxter’s poetry makes her wonder at the possibilities that lie ahead for herself. Mattie has been told what a great writer she is and she feels it too, so she considers taking the opportunity to go to college so she can become her own Emily Baxter. She knows it would mean leaving behind the people she loves and the world she knows, but it's a risk she would like to take to chase her dreams. As a woman, she has very few opportunities and society’s expectations of her were high. Her town and the people around her have the potential to hold her back but this quote shows that Mattie has equal potential to succeed independently. |

| **Quote from pages 165-168**"What's going on?" I asked."Miss Wilcox is in the parlor with Pa," Abby whispered. "She brought your exam results. You got an A-plus on your English literature and composition tests, an A in history, a B in science, and a B-minus in mathematics. Her and Pa are talking about you. She says you have genius in you and that you got into college and that Pa should let you go…"My heart had sunk to someplace down around my ankles. Miss Wilcox meant well, I knew she did, but I also knew Pa. She'd never get him to say yes; she'd only rile him. Why, oh why, had she come today? Right before my uncle was due to give me the money? Tomorrow I wouldn't need Pa's say-so, because I'd have thirty dollars in my pocket and that was all the say-so anybody needed, but I didn't need him furious at me in the meantime……My sisters scattered. Pa looked at me. "You couldn't tell me yourself?" he asked.His eyes were hard and his voice was, too, and all the soft feelings I'd had for him only moments before swirled away like slop water down a drain. No?""What for, Pa? So you could say no?”He blinked at me and his eyes looked hurt, and I thought, just for a second, that he was going to say something tender to me, but no. "Go, then, Mattie. I won't stop you. But don't come back if you do," he said. Then he walked out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. |
| --- |
| **Analysis and Importance**This quote is integral to Mattie’s story because it is an instance when her two worlds collide. Part of her would like to stay home where it is safe and comfortable and she will not have to say goodbye to everyone and everything she loves. She will not have to go against the grain of society’s and her family’s expectations. There is her father telling her she cannot go, she should not go, and he will not support her leaving. His disapproval is mostly due to him needing her more than she needs him which feeds into the guilt Mattie is weighed down by. Her father did not know she was accepted into college and Mattie was too afraid to share that exciting news. Already weighed down by his disapproval, she knew he would only tarnish her accomplishment of being accepted into college with more negativity. Then there is the huge part of her that wants to make something of her life with her creative writing and education. Miss Wilcox represents the part of Mattie that wants to defy everything she has ever learned and ignore every judgment she has received. Miss Wilcox is the only person Mattie has to advocate for her future as a writer. Until this quote, Mattie has kept most of her desires secret so as not to incite conflict. This scene depicts a physical manifestation of the emotional battle that Mattie is keeping within herself. Mattie is constantly trying to examine her options, considering the pros and cons, and wondering if she is being sensible or chasing an unreasonable and selfish fantasy. It is a battle that that she finally forced to face. |

**Classroom Use**

A Northern Light is a wonderful read for young adults, especially young women who are unsure of their path in life. It may be okay for some middle school students but I recommend this book for anyone aged 14 and over. It is a book that I would keep in my classroom for independent, outside or supplementary reading, but I am not sure I would use it in class.

If I were to use the book in class, I might use it in conjunction with a research project. Because the story is based on an actual murder that took place over 100 years ago, Donnelly had to research her topic to create an authentic fictional story. In a creative writing unit, using her novel as a model, maybe students could be assigned to pick a true crime story from a provided list, research the event, and build their own fictional retelling of the crime or somehow incorporate it into their story. It could also be utilized as a segway into discussions about the familial, cultural, and social expectations of women as well as all young people.

**Applications from Dr. Mary Warner’s Adolescents in the Search for Meaning**

**Chapter 4: Books about real life experiences**

The novel would fit well into chapter 4 of *Adolescents In The Seach For Meaning* because the novel deals with almost all of the issues Dr. Warner highlights in her book including making life choices, facing violence or abuse, and living through family and relationship issues. The main character, Mattie, experiences the most of these, although she witnesses many of her friends and family experience these issues as well. Mattie is struggling to decide whether she should chase her dreams of going to college and becoming a writer, but this would require her to leave home. Throughout the book, her family member guilts her into promising to stay home and call her crazy for wanting to leave her family behind in Big Moose Lake. Mattie does not want to feel as though she is abandoning her family but she also wants to be supported the way she has always supported others. Many people can connect to this idea of being torn between two desires. Although young people may love their family, feel guilty for wanting to leave, and do not want to abandon anyone, it is important for young people to chase their dreams and gain their freedom.

She also faces some physical abuse at home. Most of all though, Mattie’s best friend, Weaver faces the most violence in the story because Weaver and his mom are the only Black family in Big Moose Lake. Set in 1906 Weaver and his mom endure the verbal abuse of tourists as well as physical abuse when men attack Weaver. This story might be set over 100 years ago but this type of violence is not unheard of today. Some students of color especially can relate to this.

The novel highlights relationship issues between family members through Mattie's drunk vagabond uncle who blows in and out of town in a whirlwind, her upper-class aunt to turns her nose up at Mattie's family, and her older brother who left the family after their mother passed away. One of the most highlighted is the relationship between Mattie and Royal. Mattie is young and Royal’s interest in her feels magical until he might be more in love with her inheritance of land than with her.

**Chapter 5: Books about facing death and loss**

A significant portion of this book revolves around death and the struggles of dealing with it. After Mattie’s mother dies, her brother left home, leaving Mattie as the oldest sibling remaining. She takes over the role of caretaker for her three younger sisters as well as takes over the role of her father’s farm hand. She struggles to balance grieving her mother and consoling her sisters. Young adults can identify with walking the line of being a child themselves but still having to be an adult as well as emotional support to their siblings through difficult situations.

**Chapter 6: Books about identity**

Throughout the novel, Mattie struggles with being told who she is and what she should do. She is criticized and called selfish for having dreams of a different life for herself. The things she likes and want cannot coexist with her current life in Big Moose Lake. She considers putting aside her dreams as childish fantasies so she can settle down on a farm to start a family. Many people around her continue to tell her it is what she should do, but she cannot seem to let go of who she is and what she wants to be.

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative**

Lexile: 700L

ATOS book: 3.4

Dale-Chall: Raw Score: 2.1567, Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 2.1567), Final Score: 5.8,

Gradel: Grades 5 - 6

**Qualitative**

1. Structure:

The novel is easy to understand from the first-person point of view. The chapter sequence of *A Northern Light* is slightly complex as the timeline is told in chapters alternating between the present and the past. Flashbacks are marked with the chapter titles being Mattie’s word of the day. This manipulation of time can add some difficulty to the reading experience, but it also adds texture to the story and allows further insight into present-day affairs in the character's narrative.

2. Language Conventions and Clarity:

The novel is told from the first person point of view using language and actions that are conveyed clearly. Any overly complex words are Mattie’s word of the day that she defines or explains for the reader.

3. Knowledge demands:

The text demands that the reader differentiates between the past and present. Donnely manipulates time in her stories by alternating between the past and present until they eventually come together. The text also demands that the reader have some understanding of farm life in the early 1900s. Although most phrases and terms are explained, if readers are unfamiliar with the concept, it may be harder to grasp. However, picturing Mattie’s description of farm life should not be an issue for a reader as the use of pathos surrounding the farm should be easily understood. The novel also demands an understanding of the time period in regard to civil rights for women and black people. There is also some intertextuality with many references to popular literature from the 19th century although an in-depth knowledge of these texts is not necessary to understand the character's journey.

4. Levels of Meaning/ Purpose

On the surface, the novel is about a girl who is deciding whether to go to college to pursue her dreams or stay on the farm and marry like everyone expects her to. The text is relatively straight forward but Donnelly does use figurative language, irony, and unfamiliar language to create layered meanings in the text. These tools may not affect readers’ grasp of the novel.

**Complexity and Why Young Adults Should Read *A Northern Light***

The qualitative complexity of this book is probably greater than the quantitative analysis expresses. There are likely plenty of middle school-age children who can grasp some of the key concepts of this book but to be understood at a level where it can be appreciated and even beneficial to young people, *A Northern Light* is best for high school students. It is a relatively easy read but it provides high school students with a relatable character. 10th grade and up can probably relate to this book the best as they are well into their high school years and are considering what paths they might take after they graduate. This book is largely about the pressure and guilt that family, peers, and other adults impose on young people regarding their future. So many young adults have their own dreams and aspirations but the pressure they face can be detrimental and discouraging. This book provides a female protagonist who is given many reasons not to chase her dream but who decides that it is a risk worth taking anyway. Being a young white girl living on a farm in the early 1900s is very different from being a young adult today, but her desire to create a life for herself in which she can find joy, happiness, and fulfillment is something many contemporary young adults begin to consider in their high school years.