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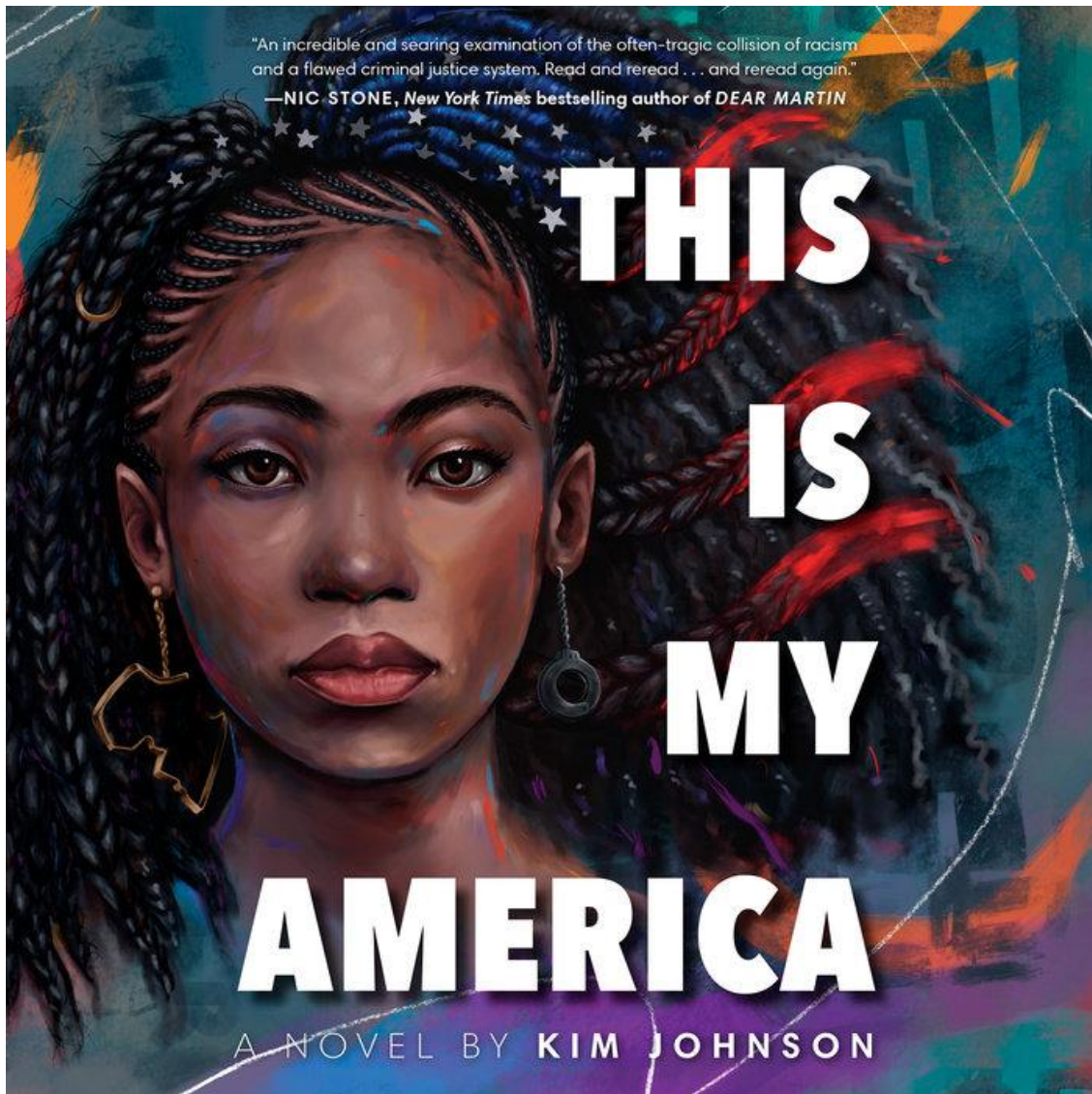
Dr. Mary Warner

ENGL 112B Literature for young adults

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This is My America

By Kim Johnson



About the Author:

<https://www.kcjohnsonwrites.com/>



Source: https://aalbc.com/authors/author.php?author_name=Kim+Johnson

Kim Johnson is an author, educator and activist. Her education includes degrees from University of Oregon and the University of Maryland, College Park. While in college she was a major advocate for social justice. Her debut novel *This is my America*, focuses on innocent black men who are criminally sentenced and the families that are left behind after the tragedies. She has since gone on to write another novel whos story is taken straight from the press titled *Invisible Son*, about a teen who is falsely accused of a crime and fights to reclaim his innocence.

- She has received the Pacific Northwest Book Award and Malka Penn Human Rights Award for Children's Literature.
- Focus on social justice writing/issues that specifically affect young adults.

- Kim feared that releasing a book during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement would be seen as taking away from the movement and her capitalizing on the backs of other social justice movements.

Summary

The novel is told in the first person perspective in the voice of the main protagonist Tracy Beaumont. When she was younger her father was convicted and sentenced to death for a crime that the Beaumont family knows he is innocent of. Tracy's main focus has been writing letters to justice groups hoping to get her fathers case reopened and ultimately prove his innocence. She has been feeling increased pressure since her father has less than a year left before his scheduled execution. She is further frustrated by the feeling that the rest of her family is not as invested in the matter as her. A sense that they are sort of moving on with their lives. This is most evident with her older brother who is being interviewed on television and is receiving a full scholarship to a major university.

As the story progresses Jamal (Tracy's brother) is sought after by police as the prime suspect in a murder of one of their fellow classmates. Knowing that her brother is innocent and not wanting to see a repeat of what is happening with her father, Tracy recruits help from friends past and present and launches her own investigation into the ordeal. She starts to uncover compelling evidence and receives word that her fathers case will be reopened. In retaliation hate groups attack her family. Undeterred, Tracy continues her investigation uncovering more evidence. The Justice group that is representing her father agrees to send a second representative to represent Jamal. During an argument over whether or not Jamal should surrender to the police, a gun is fired and one of the officers is shot.

At the station while being questioned, a woman makes a statement of past hate crimes and other criminal activity by a police officer even going so far as to place him at the scene of the crime at the time their father was alleged to have been there. She confesses that even though she told the police, she never followed up with her testimony even after her father was convicted. With this new testimony and evidence of massive police corruption, Tracy's father is able to be exonerated for his crime and Jamal is no longer a suspect. At a press conference Mr. Beaumont credits Tracy's efforts with his release from prison. The novel ends with Tracy writing one last letter to the agency that helped her father stating that she would be starting a podcast dedicated to injustices within the justice system.

Quote 1

“Time runs my life. A constant measuring of what's gone and what's to come. Jamal's hundred meter dash is a blazing 10.06 seconds. That's how my older brother got his monumental interview. I'm not thinking about Jamal's record, though. I'm thinking about Daddy's time. Seven years-- 2,532 days served, to be exact.”

“This running clock above my head's been in place since his conviction. That moment branded me. Mama gripped the courtroom bench to keep from collapsing as each juror repeated *guilty*. I looked to Mama for an explanation. The empty look in her eyes cried out the answer: death. Since then, it's tick tock.” (Johnson, 1).

This quote is chosen from the very early text because it really sets not only the tone for the entirety of the text, but also shows the source of the motivation that drives the main character forward. Throughout the story as we see the letters that Tracy writes to Innocence X, the investigating she does on her father's case, the actions she takes in response to accusation against her brother, and the subsequent investigation she did on his behalf to prove his innocence, it's

almost as if the reader can see this tick tock clock over her head. This constant symbolic representation of that fact that time was not on her side. This is what drives the character. The race against time to save the ones she loves.

Quote 2

“I should Turn the TV off, but I can't help myself. I turn up the volume. Susan plays footage of Jamal's interview. they replayed Mama saying Daddy's innocent, then Jamal smiling on the stage. the words *The calculated Act of a killer?* Flash up on the screen.

The news continues, except this time Susan's talking about daddy. His mug shot goes up with sketches from the courtroom. It's been so long since I've seen his story on the news. Flashes of old memories run through my head. Deja vu.

Jamal Beaumont is the son of a convicted killer James Beaumont. Kathy and Mark Davidson were killed by gunshot in they're downtown Galveston County office. A second suspected shooter, Jackson ridges, barricaded himself in his home and died when police attempted to bring him in for questioning. James Beaumont stood trial. Upon conviction, he was the only one to pay for the crime in the Davidson family massacre.

“Jackson was murdered too,” I say to the television.

The district attorney wanted Daddy to take a plea deal, say it was self-defense, anything to get the death penalty off the table. Daddys attorney thought he should take the deal because of the way the case is building against them. But Daddy wouldn't do it. Not when he was innocent. He also believed if he took a deal, then he wouldn't just be playing for himself, he'd be cleaning that for Jackson, too. He couldn't help justify Jackson's murder, so Daddy didn't take the deal.

We lost.

Even with the gun missing...Even though there was no blood or marks on Daddy... even though he had multiple people who can confirm his alibi.... we lost.

My father's alibi was trumped by white witnesses in the neighborhood who swore they saw Daddy's Buick, with two black men inside, leaving the Davidson office late that afternoon, not at noon like Daddy said. I used to ask Daddy if he thought things would be different if he had a Black attorney, that maybe his attorney would have understood the bias in the trial more. Daddy squashed that. It wasn't about the race of his attorney, but about being a Black man on trial in town that never accepted us. Everyone wanted an answer to a heinous crime, and it was easier to think it was an outsider, someone, 'not like them'.

I won't let Jamal go down like that. Not this time. Not if I can help it.

We can't lose again.” (Johnson, 88-90).

The title of the chapter is called guilty until proven innocent. All too often in the modern world and culture that we live in this is the standard that we as individuals can suffer. We face the court of public opinion, reputation destruction, slander, all in an effort to get the story out first. This world that most of us live in now, is what many persons of color along with other minority groups have faced for generations. This quote was chosen for the almost desperate determination on the part of the Tracy to put her foot down and say no, not this time. This time justice will be served.

Quote 3

“Dear Steve,

You thought I'd stop, huh? This is going to be my last letter. I bet you wonder what I'm going to be doing. I'm starting my senior year with my own podcast; Corner for Justice. I decided I didn't need to be the editor of the school newspaper if I can reach a larger audience with social

media. I have just over 100,000 followers already! It's all about highlighting injustice. Would you be willing to do an interview? I've got a lot of people lined up, so time ticking. I don't plan to wait 7 years for a response.

Thank you again for everything you've done. Congratulations on your recent case. Don't forget us when your big time. I've got a couple of cases you might be interested in.

Peace and solidarity,

Tracy Beaumont.” (Johnson, 387).

This last quote was chosen for a few reasons, the first to leave it to not spoil the intrigue and events of the novel itself as it is a good read that deals with the harsh realities of the justice system for many minorities. However, the main reason this quote was chosen is to demonstrate the continued motivation of the character and her quest for justice. After getting everything that she could of asked for and the happiest of endings, she still chooses to advocate and help others seek the justice that they deserve.

Classroom Use

I would use this book in class to illustrate two points. First, that the system of law and justice isn't perfect. There are weak links that anyone can fall victim to, especially persons of color, but there are more good apples than bad ones who only want to do the right thing and see justice served. Which leads to the second point. While some of the actions taken by Tracy skirt the letter of the law, and others outright violate the law, I think we can learn from her intentions more than her actions. Her intentions were to stand up for injustice, this is why she wrote to Innocence X weekly on behalf of her father, and then again for her brother. It is also why upon the resolution of all that injustices in her life, she still felt the need to create a podcast that spoke

out about injustices. Real change can only come from constructive actions. If we do not speak out on it, then we are silently accepting it.

I would tie this into excerpts from other novels that deal with justice such as *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson, *12 Angry Men*, by Reginald Rose, *The Rainmaker*, and *A Time to Kill*, by John Grisham. These books deal with powerful issues of the innocent and the guilty. Right and wrong and the consequences that come with both. Additionally they all have film adaptations that can help bring the power of words to life for when words alone are not enough.

Why should you give this book to teens?

Our nation is experiencing the most polarization since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. We are not just divided on political lines, we are divided on issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, religious, cultural lines and so many more. We as a nation throughout our history stood up against tyranny and injustice, now fight each other to impose tyranny and injustice on ourselves. In this era of uncertainty, a novel where a young African American teenager, decides to not accept the status quo of blatant and obvious injustice and fight for what she knows and believes to be true, can only serve as a good role model for those who do not wish to live in such a fractured society and fight for the only thing that really matters in any society...justice.

Other important factors:

- Interpersonal connections that deal with loss and acceptance.
- Personal sacrifices made in order to care for the family.
- Direct/indirect racism.
- Achieving justice does not end racism.
- The power/liberation that is achieved through proactive activism.

How it fits best in Chapters 4-8 in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*:

Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences:

- Tracy is a young teen whose father is falsely imprisoned and sentenced to death. She is trapped between the duality of her fathers “time running out” while living in a world where “life must go on.” Many young people deal with parents who are navigating the criminal justice system.
- Tracy experiences and witnesses people acting and being racist. Many young adults face and deal with racism.
- Tracy sees the way the justice system tries to persecute her brother. Many students at one time had been accused of something they didn't do by proximity or word of mouth to a crime/incident.
- Taking one's fate or fortune into one's own hands is something that many young adults will relate to in order to protect the ones they love.

Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss:

- Tracy faces the prospect of losing her father to an unjust criminal justice system. Students may have family or friends who are incarcerated.
- Tracy faces the potential of having the same thing happen to her father. Students may have been accused of something they didn't do and had to face that fear and uncertainty. Additionally, teenagers who are raised by single parents regardless of reason may empathize with this character's journey.

Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions:

- Tracy sees the way her, and members of her family are treated by people who are secretly racist, and openly racist. Students will surely have faced persecution or bullying to some extent. Many teenagers may share in this struggle.
- Tracy sees the level of incompetence on the part of the police to actually investigate the crime her brother is suspected of. Students or young adults, not being trusted or allowed to 'give their side' or whose statements are discounted because of their youth is something most are able to relate to.
- Tracy struggles with the decision to take the investigation into her own hands. Students may have been in situations where they have to take charge of their own fate rather than leave it in the hands of others.
- Tracy having been thoroughly invested in her father's case sees that it was not built on evidence but rather innuendo and circumstance. Students may have been put in a position where they are presumed guilty rather than innocent and have had to prove themselves innocent rather than be trusted.

Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival:

- Tracy exhibited great courage in standing up for her beliefs. Many students are willing to push back against authority figures for what they believe in.
- Tracy's moral courage in the face of those who wished her to stop or discouraged her was substantial. Students may have been dissuaded or discouraged from pursuing something that they believed in or wanted.
- Tracy's perseverance against criticism from even her own family was exceptional. Students could face criticism from any corner, especially at home.

Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable

- Tracy learns that not everyone is on her family's side, and that people have secrets.
- Tracy learns not everyone will stand up and do the right thing.
- Tracy learns that even those who are supposed to be incorruptible can be corrupt.
- This book is suitable not just for young adults but those of older ages as well, particularly if interested in issues of social justice.

Quantitative

Lexile: Age: Middle/High School, 650L

AR: ATOS Book level 4.3, Interest level: UG 9-12, AR points: 12.0

Readability: 7-12 graders, ages 12-18

Dale-Chall: 9-12 grade

Flesch-Kincaid: 10th grade

I would recommend this book to 9-12th grade students.

Qualitative

1. Structure

- a. First person perspective.
- b. The story is told as a linear progression as from the protagonist herself as she recalls her past.
 - i. The story is told in the sequence of the major events leading up to her brother being suspected of a crime, to the resolution of that story arc.

- c. Special emphasis is given to how Tracy feels in each event of major and minor significance allowing the reader to fully emphasize with what the character is feeling.

2. Language Conventions and Clarity

- a. Word choice and vocabulary are simple.
- b. Tracy's speech captures the emotions that she feels in the moment.
 - i. The reader can hear the teenager's POV, fear, anxiety, determination, and outrage of the larger issues yet her emotions remain grounded and are not overly sensationalized in the retelling.

3. Knowledge Demands

- a. The text requires only an understanding of the criminal justice system.
 - i. Jury Trials.
 - ii. The rights of an accused and the rights of due process.
 - iii. The limitations of police powers.
 - 1. What police are and are not allowed to do while serving as police officers.
 - 2. Enforcing the law/up holding the peace vrs. Violating the public trust and serving a personal agenda.
- b. The reader understands the dynamics between what is right and what is legal.
 - i. Although Tracy's intent was honorable and comes from good intentions, tampering with evidence is a crime and could have had serious repercussions.

- ii. Although she had intended to protect her brother and shield him from law enforcement until she could conclude her investigation, lying to police and obstructing official investigations are crimes and could also have had repercussions.
- iii. Although it is not mentioned in the text, the District Attorney in an effort to keep the public relations disaster out of the public eye, likely chose not to prosecute Tracy for her interference in a police investigation. Tracy could have been charged with crimes for her actions.

4. Levels of Meaning

a. First level of meaning

- i. The surface level-meaning: African Americans often face injustices at the hands of the criminal justice system.
- ii. This injustice is often inflicted on those who lack the capacity to adequately defend themselves in the legal system.
- iii. This leads to several possible outcomes.
 - 1. Acceptance of injustice.
 - 2. Seeking other groups aid/support in getting legal assistance.
 - 3. Taking matters into their own hands/seeking their own justice.

b. Second level of meaning

- i. The aftermath of what happens to those who are left behind when a family member is incarcerated.
- ii. Do the families give up, succumb to degeneracy, fight back, endure, or move on/move past it.

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