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Book Talk: We Are Lost and Found, By Helene Dunbar



Part 1: About the Author

“Called the ‘queen of heartbreaking prose’ by *Paste Magazine*, Helene Dunbar is the author of *WE ARE LOST AND FOUND* (Sourcebooks, September 2019), *THE PROMISE OF LOST THINGS* (July 2022), and *PRELUDE FOR LOST SOULS* (August, 2020) as well as *BOOMERANG*, *THESE GENTLE WOUNDS*, and *WHAT REMAINS*. Over the years, she's worked as a drama critic, journalist, and marketing manager, and has written on topics as diverse as traditional Irish music, court cases, and theater. She lives in Nashville with her husband and daughter.” -Helene Dunbar About Me section; <https://www.helenedunbar.com/about-me>

Dunbar has several other LGBT titles but has not often spoken about her own experiences with sexuality. The book does feature afterwords from Ron Goldberg, Jeremiah Johnson and Jason Walker. In an interview with *The Nerd Daily*, Dunbar says “When it came to the history of the AIDS crisis, I was committed to getting it 100% accurate. I remember most of the AIDS-related news of the time. I followed it closely and then worked for a state government writing grant funding proposals to the CDC in the early 90’s. So my main challenge was making sure that everything I referenced was specific to 1983 and then writing Michael’s story *around* those historical facts that were date-specific.”

Part 2: About the Book

The Main Character, a 16/17 year old boy named Michael Bartolomeo, is gay and living in a homophobic household just as the AIDS crisis is taking off. Michael is friends with two colorful characters: James, a queer young man who does theater and seems to have a knack for winning over anyone and everyone with his good looks and charm, and Becky, a young woman who is trying to find her own way among her mother’s drug habit and her boyfriend, Andy, constantly patrolling for the neighborhood watch. Michael’s older brother, Conner, was kicked out for coming out as gay and Michael fears the same, until he meets a boy named Gabriel and the two begin a romantic relationship.

The book is written in a stream-of-consciousness style. It’s been compared to *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, but I found it more akin to *Angela’s Ashes*, especially in the way that

the author did not use quotation marks and only indicated someone was speaking with context clues.

Part 3: Quotes

“But I know when to keep quiet. This is only one of the things that makes me smarter than my brother.” -pg 54

Context: Michael is often in conflict with his abusive father and every conversation is a dance to keep said father happy. Conner was often known for riling up his father and standing up to him, including by publicly coming out as gay, or by coming out at all. Michael is not only saying that he knows not to mouth off for his own safety, but he knows that coming out is extremely dangerous, and that Conner was foolish to do so when he knew the consequences.

The first time I tried to compete after he died, I fell off the high bar. No matter what I did I couldn't hold my grip. It wasn't important anymore. -pg 91

Context: Gabriel used to be a gymnast. Now, during the story, he spends most of his time working to provide for the family after his father died. Directly, the quote is about how Gabriel could no longer find the drive to compete after losing his father, but within the larger context of the book, this ties in with the general feeling of many LGBT people at the time. The AIDS crisis caused rampant fear and hopelessness among the population and many lost their proverbial grip, choosing to stay closeted and remain abstinent in order to keep from becoming sick. Many had lost friends, such as James who lost his friend Steven to AIDS and subsequently decided to abstain from relationships and sex. In the face of loss and death, passion is pushed aside.

Charm can't cut through hate. Anger. Fear. -pg 228

Context: James was assaulted outside of the theater after one of his shows and beaten to the point of needing surgery. When Michael pictures the incident, he notes that James never got into fights because he always used his charm to get out of these situations. But said charm may have been what almost got him killed, and Michael realizes that civility and kindness has no effect on the truly hateful. This is one of the turning points for Michael finally coming out.

Part 4: Passage

You can't escape Madonna, not even here.

While James holds court—he seems to know everyone here; and everyone here, girls, boys, those in-between, or something else altogether, know or want to know him—I dance on my own a few feet away to “Holiday.”

This is different than Echo, and not simply because the Friday night crowd there is always a little less adventurous.

The crowd here is older. More glamorous. More intimidating.

But still, I think of Gabriel.

I close my eyes and dance and sway until I could be anywhere. On Mars, even. And when I open them, James is standing next to me, smiling.

What? I ask. It takes me a minute to come back to reality.

I envy you, he says. You've found a way to be content with simply your own company.

Have I? I ask. You sound like Becky's phone guy. What's that supposed to mean, anyhow?

He throws back a shot of something. Sometimes, I wish I didn't need this, he says, waving his empty glass around at the crowd. I wish I didn't need their attention.

I think about trying to explain that I'm not alone because my head is filled with Gabriel, and however much I love playing the guitar and performing, I enjoy my time with him and James and Becky more, and I'd happily never write another song if that meant Gabriel and I would be... something.

But a look in his eyes stops me, and, high on music and life and love, I lean in and hug him instead.

This passage is a wonderful snippet into the relationship between Michael and James, which is romantic in many instances in the book but never passes the point of being fully love. James “holds court” like a king, signifying that Michael sees him as royalty and untouchable, which is shattered when James is beaten later. Contrary, James sees Michael as having something he wants—a way to be content just blending into the shadows. Even though Michael does want to be noticed for who he truly is. In this passage, they both know each other deeply but don't know each other at all.

Part 5: Readability

Dale-Chall Formula worksheet

Raw score 1.9499 [?]

Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 1.9499) [?]

Final Score: 5.6 [?]

New Dale-Chall Readability Index:

Grade level: Grades 5 - 6

[f] [a] [r]

The Dale-Chall formula, based on the language presented in the text, recommends that this book be taught to children grades 5-6. This is likely due to the stream-of-consciousness style format being relatively easy for most adolescents to follow, as it mimics how people talk and therefore is easier to digest. While the text uses a lot of metaphor and flowery language, overall the meaning and general plot is incredibly easy to follow

Part 6: How I would teach this Book

Despite Dale-Chall's recommendations, I would teach this book to a class of Sophomore-Junior high school students (ages 14-17, or around the same age as the main characters). While I don't doubt that the language itself is easy to understand, the concepts discussed in the book might be harder for younger children to grasp, and having characters with a similar age range to the class often helps captivate them, as they tend to feel better represented.

If possible to save class time I would encourage reading outside of class, however this is not always feasible. Luckily, *We Are Lost And Found* has an audiobook version that can be provided to students. If there is no time for in-class reading, I would select a number of quotes from the book, along with page numbers, for students to analyze to initiate discussion. Probing questions such as "How well do you think James knows Michael" and "Why were there news stories about a murderer in the background of the text" would be used to draw out discussion. The author also has a list of discussion questions about the book on her website.

Overall I think the best part of this book is its relatability, especially to its target audience, and that I feel will assist in teaching it to children of a similar age range.