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ENGL-112B

Professor Warner

***The Extraordinaries* Book Talk**

A person and a dog

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Author Information

* Author’s Website: <http://www.tjklunebooks.com/>
* Facts about the Author:
  + He believes that, in his own words:

*“It's important—now more than ever—to have accurate, positive, queer representation in stories.”*

* + As of writing this, Klune has authored 14 novels,

all of which feature queer protagonists

From TJ Klune’s website

Summary

*The Extraordinaries* is a book about a gay teen with ADHD named Nick Bell who lives in a world where superheroes—known as Extraordianries—are real. After the death of his mother, an event which separated his life into Before and After, Nick coped with the help of his ragtag group of friends consisting of the lesbian couple Gibby and Jazz, his best friend Seth, and the sexually frustrating existence that is Owen Burke. The novel is both a hilarious and painful read, as Nick clumsily attempts to navigate his daily life with a brain that won’t sit still, a father who is trying his best, an Extraordinary named Shadow Star who he may or may not have an unhealthy obsession with, and most of all, with his insatiable desire to become extraordinary himself.

Quotes (all of the following quotes are abridged)

1. “Nick Bell stared at his phone as he shifted on his bed in his room. “Not gay,” he muttered to himself. “He has *sequins* on his costume.” He thought about deleting the comment, but others were already responding to it, coming after FireStoned with a vengeance, so he decided to leave it up… *Straight people*, Nick thought as he shook his head. He’d never understand them.” (13)
   1. Context: Nick Bell, under the username Shadowstar744, is the proud author of a self-insert romantic fan-fic between the Extraordinary hero Shadow Star and the original male character Nate Belen. Nick, in this scene, is reading through the comments on his latest update to the story, one of which is a user named FireStoned who seems displeased about Shadow Star being portrayed as gay.
   2. Significance: This quote, which comes right at the very beginning of the book at the start of the first chapter, does a really good job, I feel, of establishing the protagonist’s mindset along with the setting. This book is very clearly targeted at a contemporary (novel published in July 2020) young adult audience who is well-versed in the internet and is at the very least aware of Tumblr and fan fiction. As someone who rarely-if-ever reads novels that were written within the past decade, this opening took me aback somewhat; at the same time, however, it was refreshing to be shoved into the perspective of a character who was doing something as 21st-century and as gay as writing a gay fanfiction online. My personal take aside, the first few pages of the book, starting with this quote, do a good job of quickly establishing Nick’s character.
2. “Dad began to pace, shoulders stiff. ‘Because I asked you for this one thing. For this year to be *different*. For you to do everything you could to be the best possible person you could be. And all I’m seeing here is that it’s more of the same.’ ‘I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment to you,’ Nick said bitterly, wiping his eyes. ‘Dammit, kid. First it was Owen, and I let it go. And then it’s this—this *Shadow Star*, and this weird obsession you have with him. I just don’t—why do you have to be this way? Why do you have to be the way you are?’ Nick knew the power of words. He knew that sometimes when they landed, they exploded with the force of a carelessly tossed grenade. Nick hear what his father said. He heard every word. They exploded at his feet and shredded his skin… [later] He was on the train, surrounded by people and staring blankly ahead when his phone buzzed. Nick thought about ignoring it. He pulled it out of his pocket. A text from his dad. He *really* thought about ignoring it. But maybe it was an apology. Maybe it was Dad saying he was sorry, that he didn’t mean it, that he was just fine with the way Nick was, that he didn’t need him to be anything more. He opened the message. *You forgot to take your pill this morning. Called the school. Nurse will have your dose. See her before class.* And that was it. Nick deleted the message before sliding the phone back in his pocket. The train car rocked gently beneath his feet.” (167-168)
   1. Context: Nick has just made a critical error, as he is prone to do, and his relationship with his father is about to suffer because of it.
   2. Significance: Honestly, every single conversation between Nick and his father could be in here. Their relationship feels incredibly natural, tangible and overall well-realized. Their banter is entertaining to no end, and there are numerous emotional and heartwarming moments between them that made me legitimately smile while reading. However, it is for that exact reason that I picked this quote, a quote that is neither funny nor heartwarming. This quote, and the events that follow from it (such as the next quote), really exemplifies the idea that a single word or phrase spoken in anger can seriously impact someone, especially someone with a brain like Nick’s which tends latch onto things and run with them until it reaches the logical extreme. I wasn’t far into the book (I hadn’t even gotten to this quote yet) when I decided that one of the quotes absolutely had to be a conversation between Nick and his father. Having finished the book, I think that this conversation is the most significant of them.
3. “’Now, wait a minute,’ Gibby said, taking a step forward. ‘Nick, you don’t need to do this, okay? It was a joke, man. Please don’t jump into the river. I’m pretty sure this is where they found that foot last year. Like, an entire human foot. Please don’t jump into dismembered foot water—and oh my god, why did you bring *goggles?*’ Nick fit the goggles over his eyes. ‘Protection. Everyone knows you should wear goggles when you go swimming.’ ‘Nick, seriously,’ Gibby said, sounding alarmed. ‘Let’s figure out something else, okay? Or, hey! Maybe we should go find a TV somewhere to see if Pyro Storm and Shadow Star are still fighting or whatever. Wouldn’t that be cool? Maybe they’ve hit each other so hard, their costumes are torn and you can see skin!’ *That* was almost enough to derail him. ‘Foul tempress,’ he hissed at her. ‘I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work! I’ve thought this through.’ ‘See, that’s the thing. I don’t know if you have. This is dumb, Nick. You *know* it is.’ The funny thing was, he *did* know that. Everything about this was stupid. But he couldn’t find a way to tell them how desperate he was, that he was out of ideas and that he had nothing left. He couldn’t tell them about his father’s words ringing in his ears over and over again: *Why do you have to be the way you are?* Pity. That was what he’d get from them. Pity. He didn’t want it. He just wanted to be different… Gibby tried one last time. ‘Nicky, no.’ ‘Nicky, *yes*,’ he crowed, and took off toward the edge of the pier. The wood creaked underneath his feet, and the rancid air whipped by his face. He clutched his hands into fists, feeling the ring that had cost thirty-seven dollars plus shipping sent to him by a drag queen from Milwaukee named Veronica B. Dazzled. And as he reached the end of the pier and jumped as far as he could into the Westfield River, Nicholas Bell just *knew* it was going to work.” Spoilers from the first line of the next chapter: “It didn’t work.” (215-217)
   1. Context: Nick is fighting with his dad, is feeling sexually confused in towards his best friend, has been off of his meds for three days, and has basically reached peak desperation in his attempt to become an Extraordinary. He stands on the precipice of a filthy, disgusting, sludge river wearing nothing but his boxers and a gaudy, oversized, rhinestone ring that he bought off eBay from a drag queen named Veronica B. Dazzled.
   2. Significance: I wanted to include this quote because I think that it best, out of any in the book, portrays the extent of this book’s absurdity and the untamable beast that is Nick’s brain. This scene is, I think, Nick’s most ridiculous moment. However, while it may seem absurd to the point of being stupid to someone who is viewing it in a vacuum, Nick’s leap into the Westfield River comes at the end of a buildup of confusing and painful emotions, on top of it being his third day after stopping his medication cold turkey. Moreover, as one may expect, this ludicrous free-wheeling high is followed by an incredible low. I think that this entire sequence of events is akin to a way in which Nick described his brain early on, which was something to the effect of: My brain runs and runs and runs and runs and runs; faster and faster and faster and faster until it inevitably crashes. This leap is the moment just before the crash.

How this Book Might be Taught

* I struggle to think of a commonly taught novel that this one would pair well will except for perhaps *The Catcher in the Rye* wherein Holden is somewhat similar to Nick in that both have minds that function a bit differently from the average person and both seem to struggle with the concept of purpose. That said, I think that this book could very well be taught on its own; though, perhaps not to a high school class.
* My reasoning for that last is that the book does have a bit of sexual content, though most of it is just in Nick’s head and/or dialogue as opposed to being described in narration. Even so, while I think that this book is aimed at teens and should be read by teens, it may not be approved at the high school level. In which case, I think it could be a good read for an introductory college English course that most students probably take in their first year.
* As for book categories listed in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*, I think that there are actually three which could work quite well.
  + Books about Real-Life Experiences could work because the book is mostly about Nick’s day-today life as he makes life choices and deals with his inter-personal relationships—romantic, platonic, and familial alike.
  + Books about Facing Death and Loss could also work because the death of Nick’s mother (which occurs before the story begins) is a major center point for Nick’s worldview and, in particular, greatly defines his relationship with his father
  + Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions is definitely the best choice for this book, though (if one had to be chosen). Nick (and his friends) being queer is clearly a major aspect of the novel, but more importantly than that is actually Nick’s ADHD and “the way he is.” The idea that Nick only has this very small group of people in his life who accept him the way he is is paramount to the story; it ties back in to the previous point about death and loss because his mother, while she lived, accepted him more than anyone else in the world. Nick is crippled by the idea that people see him as ‘different in a bad way’ which, I think, is a driving force behind why he wants to become special.

Text Complexity

* Quantitative: The book scored a 4.1 in ATOS and 600-800 in The Lexile Framework. Both of these ratings put the book at a 2nd-3rd grade reading level. While it seems a bit unusual for a book aimed at a teenage audience, this rating really doesn’t surprise me. This book is fully of very common, simple words put together into short sentences. From a PURELY QUANTITATIVE perspective, this extremely low rating makes sense to me.
* Qualitative: Qualitatively, the book is on a much higher level. It is rife with innuendos and sarcasm. Characters are often cut-off mid-sentence and one is made to discern what it is they were going to say from context and knowledge of things that teenagers say. Nick, himself, is an extremely dense character and much of the humor comes from situations such as instances where everyone *but* Nick understands the romantic nature of Nick’s feelings for a certain someone. However, since in such instances Nick (who we, as the readers, are attached to) is obvious to such things, they are not explained explicitly in the narration; they must be inferred entirely by the reactions, dialogue, and facial expressions of the other characters around Nick. On top of this, the book leans very heavily on “what it’s like to be a teenager,” meaning that one needs to either be a teenager or have been a teenager in order to fully appreciate it.
* Reader-Task: Since I believe this should be taught to teenagers, most of them will likely have experienced at least some mild degree of teenage rebellion or just general issues with parents as well as the matter of teenage romance. Experience with those things will obviously vary from student to student, but I feel that they are universal enough to not be problematic aspects when it comes to students being able to relate the book to their own lives. There are two other aspects that are less universal, however. The first is being gay. Obviously, not everyone is going to be gay or be close with someone who is; thusly, this very significant aspect of the book may be hard/impossible for some to connect with on a personal level. The second is having a mental disorder. Nick has severe ADHD and thusly thinks in ways that are atypical of a “normal person.” It will definitely require an extra level of effort from most readers to get into his mindset and not be deterred.