ARRT Book Club Study
January 20, 2021
Virtual Meeting
The Knockout Queen by Rufi Thorpe
Led by Sonia Reppe
Notes taken by Elizabeth Hopkins
9 participants

Sonia asked everyone to introduce themselves and share first impressions:

-I thought the writing was fantastic. The characters were great. Unique characters I can't wait to talk about them.

-I read for character, that's what I look for. A lot of it was disturbing and difficult to read. But these characters will stay with me. I'm glad I read it.

-I didn't think I would like this book, but I really enjoyed the characters. I liked the moral gray areas and complexity.

-I agree with everyone else! I really enjoyed it! These characters were amazingly flawed and some were completely awful.

-I really liked the complexity of the characters. Very compelling. I liked that there weren't really bad guys and good guys.

-It reminded me of Eleanor and Park. That quirky relationship and the questionable home life.

-Not something I would pick up on my own, but it turned out better than I expected.

-I would have never found this book on my own but I was enthralled.

I want to talk about Bunny first…I liked trying to figure out if she was a horrible person, a murderer, or do I like her because I'm seeing her through Michael's eyes? Strong opinions on Bunny? I can make a case for her as a good person who doesn't know her strength.

-I like the fact that her body was different from other girls. That's something that's so hard for teenagers. I liked that element of her character. She was different and unique. But yes, I found myself loving her because Michael loved her. I don't know why I trusted Michael's judgement, he doesn't have the best judgement, but I did.

-I was taken with the fact that in society we have people who have anger management issues…it's a mental illness. I don't think she was a neutral character for me, but I didn't see her as wicked or malevolent but rather as ill.

-The way she processed her emotions was very repressed. Even when she's discussing when her mom dies. Everything felt stuffed in her little box. She didn't have the resources to help her deal with that.

-I found her sympathetic. Her father is absent. No one is looking out for her and it culminates in this violent thing.

-The fact that she was defending Michael made her more sympathetic. I was trying to find reasons to justify my sympathy for her.

-I was thinking about her mother as well. The whole idea of an absent mother is so damaging to a child. Ray does love her very much and seems to have some good intentions. This is a good argument as to why a child needs a mother and a father. In my imagination her mother would have been the voice of reason and helping her with her confidence.

-As an atypical girl to begin with, she already was a bit unmoored and needed some guidance as a girl growing into a woman and she didn't have that. She had a father who was the opposite of that.

Why would people take issue with Bunny? What does it say about gender roles and societal expectations?

-Michael's observation is that she's confident, but she really wasn't. I think people assume and didn't like her because a confident woman threatens people. She wrote a normal, real character who goes up and down with her confidence which is realistic.

-I think the observation coming from Michael is interesting. If there's anyone who isn't reliable regarding what happiness is, it's Michael. I take what he says with a grain of salt.

-Yes, Michael is so insecure in a lot of ways. i.e. Michael counting calories while she's eating pizza.

How would the story have been different from Bunny's point of view?

-I don't think it would have worked. Michael's POV was a great choice.

-Michael is an unreliable narrator so there's more of a twist and irony because we're looking at the story with a tilted edge.

-We wouldn't have seen Bunny's good points as much because she's hard on herself. The author came up with Bunny's character ten years ago. She started the story from her POV and it just wasn't working until she thought of Michael's character.

Would you give this to a teenager?

-It skews a bit older. Reminiscent of Eleanor and Park because of the unlikely friendship. Eleanor has a horrible home life…they both have horrible home lives here but Michael's is more obvious. They're quirky with fun moments together.

How did you feel about Michael? How did you like how he ended up at the end of the book?

-If I brought this to my book club…our members would have a hard time with the sexual content.

-The randomness of Michael's sex life was disturbing. Anthony had exploitation on both sides. She wrote this to be disturbing, it was meant to be disturbing. He made horrible choices. The age difference was a bit horrifying.

-Interesting that Michael tried to tell Bunny not to get involved with her coach…but he was doing something so similar.

-Michael did not suppress his sexuality. I think other people in his situation would have suppressed it. His choices were dangerous but part of me was happy to see that he was honest with himself. Good for him for embracing that piece of himself that brought him joy.

-I was worried for him as a character. So dangerous. He knew this was a bad idea and dangerous, but Anthony was so different. I felt like they were really in love so the age difference didn't disturb me as much.

-But Anthony was married and had a child. I couldn't come to terms with that piece of it. I don't think we would be rooting for one of the cheaters in a couple in another story.

-From Michael's point of view, this is the obvious thing that would happen. Of course he would glob on to someone who was more of a father figure.

-I thought it was disturbing that Anthony found out he was in high school but still kept texting him. Now that you know how old Michael is, you should stop.

-We do feel Anthony's pain. She writes him a way that still makes him feel compelling.

Let's talk about the morally gray areas. "Be true to yourself with the most radical form of liberty"

-It's a profound idea and it's nice that it's in Michael's mouth when we hear it. He's so flawed and tragic and also so profound. I'm proud of where he ended up.

How did you feel about the ending?

-Tragic-comic. Bunny is so unhappy. She's unfulfilled because no one can give her a good competition.

-Bunny's ending wasn't surprising. She got out of prison, she probably learned how to fight there, and her father never stopped exploiting her. It was so apparent in the end, he didn't even care about her health.

-She never really got to be in control of her life. Everything that happened in her life was out of her control and that was pretty sad.

-Under different circumstances she would have gone to college on a volleyball scholarship. Some distance from her father would have helped her so she could make her own choices.

-A "bunny" is a tiny defenseless little creature, which was not what she was. Or was she the Energizer Bunny who never stops.

-The relationship between Bunny and her dad is so complicated. He exploited her, but she was constantly seeking her approval. Tragic all the way around. She can't get away from him but it also doesn't feel like she wants to.

Let's talk about Ray…

-If he hadn't bought the complex and if she hadn't known about the fuse boxes…she might not have even gone to jail

-She had a realistic image of her dad, but she was so forgiving of him.

-It speaks to him having a sense that he owned her.

-He was charismatic. Michael liked his company in the beginning. You could see what people liked about him. A sociopath!

-He is not a good parent. You can be charismatic, but if you're not there for the people who depend on you then you're not good.

-I was disturbed the most when Michael told him these terrible things and Ray wasn't even hurt by it.

-In his sociopath mind, he can steal Bunny's identity to invest in something that will help her future. You can tell he's very disturbed.

-It begs the question- who in this story was mentally stable? His aunt was a solid character…she's the only one who seemed to have both feet at the ground. His boss was a supportive, dependable person but he was high a lot.

-It's a story about very dysfunctional people and how they bump up against each other in different ways and what happens when they do.

Read-alikes?

-Tell the Wolves I'm Home

-Eleanor and Park

-Nothing to See Here

-All the Ugly and Wonderful Things

-The Mothers

Themes?

-The idea of our prison system. How unfair it is. How people are put in jail when they are mentally ill. A lot of political thoughts about the prison system.

-And our legal system too! And how much race played a role as well.

-Or how much money can affect your outcome.

Is this uniquely a California story? Did it have to be set in California?

-It reminded me of some neighborhoods around here…the tear-downs and the mansions.

-There was a strong sense of place. I got a good sense of the town they were in.

What drew you to this book?

-I heard so much hype about it, so I decided I had to try it.