

ARRT Literary Book Discussion
Boy, Snow, Bird by Helen Oyeyemi
Thursday January 12, 2017
2-3:10pm
Schaumburg Township District Library
19 participants

Leader: Emily Vinci
Notetaker: Becky Spratford

NOTE: These notes contain SPOILERS

- Emily began the discussion by asking for people to share any pressing feelings:
 - I had to re-read some parts because there was too much symbolism and I realized I was missing it.
 - I read the book discussion guide on Novelist after I finished the book and a lot more fell into place for me
 - A few people who had read other books by her compared them for the group.
 - Not knowing the Snow White connection would have made the book better. I was trying too hard to fit it into the Snow White tale
 - Someone else shared-- I was in a hurry and I didn't even read the flap so I wasn't thinking about the Snow White connection at all. I made fairy tale connections in general but not specifically only Snow White. I really liked the book. I think this not knowing helped me enjoy it.
 - Two people listened to the book. 1 loved the audio. The other liked only the parts where Boy is narrating the story. Bird's narration bothered her.
- Emily asked: There is so much in this book: domestic abuse, racial issues, gender identity, women's roles... With all of this, what do you see as the major theme of the book?
 - Image. I think that is the overall theme. How I look to myself, how I look to others. It includes the mirror stuff, passing, transgender, and general identity fits here too. [People went back to this person's comments multiple times during the conversation.]
 - I saw this book to be more about race. Oyeyemi is able to argue all sides of the argument about passing. She has black characters defend it and those who condemn it as even more racist than when white people were racist against black people. The issue is looked at from all sides here.

- All the characters, no matter how bad, all have something redeeming about them.
- I liked this about the book because nothing in life is simple. The author acknowledges this and isn't telling you how to be or which is correct. It is up to you.
- "Passing" and its history were discussed a bit more. Nella Larsen's book, *Passing*, was passed around. Emily also shared a quote from an interview with Oyeyemi in which she said that she was interested in looking at, "all the different lives a woman can live."
- Maybe this book is about women more than race?
- I think it is about Identity-- Who am I?
 - That is a universal question
 - Bird being a mimic made me think about identity a lot.
- Emily brought up the issue of cruelty in the book
 - Even the mostly sympathetic characters are cruel. Every single character has a bit of cruelty.
 - We mentioned instances.
 - That was interesting. Different than other books.
 - There were so many despicable characters. Normally when that happens, I stop reading, but with this book, I kept going. I liked reading it.
- Someone brought up how great the fairy tale frame was because it allowed for her as a reader to suspend her disbelief.
 - You let more things slide from a plot standpoint as a reader when you are reading a fairy tale. So I let more than I normally would slide here.
- I liked Fletcher, someone said. She was the voice of reason in the book.
- Emily asked about Frank/Frances. Critics have said this character is transphobic. Thoughts?
 - I saw her transition as more PTSD related than truly transgender.
 - The time period-- 1930s-40s-- keeps the issue vague. She was a proud woman/lesbian but got raped and couldn't deal. Becoming Frank was her way of dealing with her trauma. No one would have talked about it with her at that time.
 - We talked about the issue for a while. Some people were upset that author is saying being transgender is mental illness thing. Others thought Frank was not transgender at all. Taking on a new identity was how she dealt with being a parent to an offspring she hated because pregnancy came from rape. No one helped Frances and this is what happened as a result.
 - It's like Frank is "passing" in gender terms as a parallel to the racial passing in the novel.

- But then why at the end do Boy, Snow, and Bird head off to help Frank/Frances? Many did not think it was a good idea because of Frank's history of violence.
- They are going to "break the spell." Remember, it is a fairy tale. Together, as three, a powerful number, they can do it.
- Remember the fairy tale frame. It ends as a fairy tale to remind us that no matter how "real" the story feels, it is a fairy tale.
- Spells can be broken when both sides don't find them useful anymore [Fletcher tells that to Boy]. Maybe the spell can be broken.
- Who would you suggest this book too?
 - Other book clubs!
 - Someone said she was inspired to try it soon with her group.
 - There is so much here to discuss.
 - People who like dark fairy tales-- a currently popular subgenre. Specifics mentioned:
 - The work of Angela Carter
 - The Snow Child
 - Every Heart a Doorway
 - Even though it is dark, there is a lot of humor. Remember that when suggesting to others.
- Final issues people wanted to bring up:
 - This book made me really think about the issue of beauty and how it is used in fairy tales. Beauty=Good in those tales. This book shows that the truth is more complicated. It also questions what is beautiful. How we see beauty in ourselves and others? Those mirrors again.
 - The way Oyeyemi uses the unreliable narrator here is both subtle and pervasive. It is very unsettling. Everyone is unreliable here. Bird is also a mimic, and toward the end she is using it meanly too. This all added a level of unease to the entire book.
 - I was surprised that Snow didn't get a section.
 - I think that is because she doesn't really have a personality. She is just a beautiful vessel.