

YA in Rural Spaces: Three Trade Book Reviews

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*With 19% of US students reading and learning in rural areas, adding books representative of these populations is important for all our students. The reviews and rationales that follow provide titles worthy of space in our libraries and classrooms. Lisa Hazlett explores *Pumpkin* by Julie Murphy; Patricia Lane provides a glimpse into *Dark and Shallow Lies*; and Anne Marie Smith reviews *Full Flight* by Ashley Schumacher.*

Rurality presents an interesting conundrum. While rural places abound in the United States and elsewhere, little is known about them, partly because what makes them rural is the lack of people living in these spaces and, consequently, a lack of people who have experience in rurality. This paradox is strangely fitting, since rural spaces are often defined by what they lack. In fact, “the U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as what is not urban – that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left” (Ratcliffe et al, 2016, p.1). Viewing rurality as places that are lacking goes beyond thinking of them as lacking people. Common stereotypes for rural areas include lack of jobs, lack of culture, and lack of opportunities in general.

However, while the population density in rural areas might be light in comparison with urban and suburban areas, there are still millions of people who live in rural places. In 2019, almost 10 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics). This translates into 19% of the public school population. Furthermore, as Lisa Hazlett eloquently shared in the interview included with this issue, these areas – and the people in them – are more complex and more vibrant than many from the outside know.

Young adult literature provides an opportunity for readers to get a glimpse into teens’ lives in rurality. Those who live in a rural area have the chance to see themselves and their lives reflected in books, while those from the outside can gain a new perspective and a better understanding of rural places and the people who live there. Of course, rural spaces and those who occupy them are not monoliths, and, like young adult literature itself, encompass many facets. This issue’s featured books, which range from the laugh out-loud *Pumpkin* to the mysterious and thrilling *Dark and Shallow Lies* to the romantic *Full Flight*, acknowledge different aspects of rural life and manage to

capture what life is like in small towns while also speaking to issues that many teens, regardless of where they live, can relate to.

PUMPKIN

by Julie Murphy

(Published in 2021 by Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins)

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Waylon Brewer and his twin sister Clem are both openly gay in their small TX town of Clover City, and now finally seniors, he plans to continue being as unobtrusive as possible until their moving to Austin for college. Unfortunately, being effeminate, 6'3", and 300+ pounds with orange hair has naturally attracted negativity, but Waylon has coped by mixing self-confidence and self-defense. Mostly, he relies on Clem, his best friend, for everything while tolerating her girlfriend, Hannah.

He secretly dreams of being a drag queen, finally unleashing his inner fabulousness while performing, but for now, he's content to binge-watch his favorite TV drag show until he can begin his real life after graduation. His relative tranquility is shattered after being dumped by his sort-of boyfriend, and worse, discovering Clem's secret application to an out-of-state university. Shocked and angry, he makes a semi-serious drag show audition tape, appearing as the dazzling Pumpkin Patch. He shows it to Clem, whose accidental share causes it going viral throughout school, resulting in the cruel joke of Waylon being nominated for prom queen and Hannah for king.

Now exposed, Waylon finally grasps that he cannot put his life on hold and decides to live it large by asserting himself, widening his circle of friends and allies, and releasing Pumpkin. As the prom royalty race begins, he and Hannah begin decimating the bullies by becoming captivating, and formidable, contenders.

Waylon narrates Murphy's third visit to Clover City (*Dumplin'*, 2015; *Puddin'*, 2018), his voice alternately hilarious, sarcastic, poignant, and endearing as he nails the high school experience and being an LGBTQ+ teen. Clover City is believable, its mixture of people and personalities familiar to readers regardless of hometown, although presumably its roadhouse's all-age drag shows



are rarer. Willowdean and others from Murphy's earlier books also appear, further emphasizing the setting's familiarity.

The story is packed with encouragement, fabulosity, friendship, inclusivity, and romance, with readers, whether male or female, LGBTQ+ or not, racing through its pages to learn what happens next. Individuality is embraced even as connections to others are championed. Waylon's growth serves as the clearest example of this, as he learns the hard lesson that he and Clem have different wants and needs but that these differences will not affect their closeness. This discovery, along with his willingness to engage others, helps lessen his dependence upon her.

Self-love, empowerment, and a sense of purpose are strongly conveyed, with the importance of remaining true to oneself when facing difficulty serving as the heart of the story. Waylon's drag routines are fun and uplifting; his inimitable, "I'm Pumpkin, but you can call me Miss Patch" introduction before owning the stage with increasingly polished moves and ending with cheering ovations convey his joyful experience of liberation when performing.

Pumpkin also has full-of-surprises subplots, including Waylon's crush on the ultra-masculine Tucker becoming something more and his renewed closeness with once-chubby Kyle, who has been overbearing since his weight loss.

Murphy chooses not to depict Clover City as the typical bastion of LGBTQ+ hatred, with these teens' lives torturous until fleeing after graduation, finally able to live as desired. While hatred and bullying exist, they are mentioned rather than elaborated through Waylon's reticence, with the adolescent majority supportive of peers' sexual identities, seen by Clem and Hannah's full social life.

Through his experiences Waylon realizes everyone has different, yet difficult, trials; both perspectives on rural life exist, with educators noting and supporting his vital commentary of sometimes feeling trapped by his town, but so do all students, their fear of others' perceptions likewise causing the hiding of important parts of themselves. He boldly suggests everyone become and act as their authentic selves now, rather than later and regardless of where living.

LGBTQ+ teens face harsh difficulties today, as do many others; recommending this feel-good novel, which manages to validate, inspire, and instruct through the immensely likeable Waylon, is sorely needed as a bright spot in all adolescents' too-often dim lives.

DARK AND SHALLOW LIES

by Ginny Myers Sain

(Published in 2021 by Razorbill)

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A mystery set in the rural town of La Cachette, Louisiana, *Dark and Shallow Lies* is the debut novel of author Ginny Myers Sain. The novel's setting is known as the Psychic Capital of the World. Every summer, numerous tourists visit the town by boat for the day and head back to New Orleans. Tourists enjoy visiting the island to indulge their notions of the psychic town. In fact, La Cachette thrives on tourists. Although seventeen-year-old Grey has moved away from La Cachette, she visits the town every summer to see family and friends. Grey and her best friend Elora are known to be "twin flames," (p. 6). They have much in common and even share the same birthday. The book centers around the disappearance of Elora, and the story's point of view is Grey's.

As the book commences, readers discover that Elora has disappeared several months ago, yet Elora frequently appears in Grey's mind. Many La Cachette residents have psychic power, and Grey's power is clairvoyance. In every chapter, readers receive details surrounding Elora's disappearance. Grey endures multiple internal battles as she replays the mistakes she has made. Tensions run high as Grey tries to figure out what happened to her friend. Readers come along for the ride as the novel takes them on a journey in this whodunnit.

The text's setting plays an important role in this mystery story, allowing teachers and students to explore the strong influence of the rural environment on the book's mystical elements. The setting of La Cachette contributes to the novel's mysticism because it is heavily isolated and sparsely populated. La Cachette is as "absolutely as far south as you can get in Louisiana, just above the spot where the mighty Mississippi splits into three fingers" (p. 10). The population of the island is listed as "106 living souls" (p. 10). One can infer that the island is inhabited with the non-living.

Grey's self-discovery will enable readers to learn and grow alongside her. Grey undergoes a major self-exploration, allowing teachers to engage with students about her self-actualization. Grey's journey includes vulnerability, openness, and leaning into acceptance of the help of others.



The book also offers opportunities for students to explore the mystery whodunnit genre. Teachers should highlight the text structure and the critical elements of a mystery. The importance of character development and the impact of details are helpful to examine in relation to a mystery story. All the small things matter, and the author includes them for a reason. Students should be made aware of the importance of details in writing and in life. Moreover, teachers could review a list of these elements, and the students could go on a quest to explore how the story meets the requirements. Additionally, students could maintain detailed notes on the various phases of a mystery. As students read the novel, they could describe the different sections of the mystery structure and how it impacts the story.

Finally, the historical significance of the novel's setting offers opportunities to explore the French's impact on the Louisiana region. Teachers can also explain what a Creole person is and their effects on the people of Louisiana. This type of learning provides a chance for students to gain an understanding of cultures that might be different than their own.

Dark and Shallow Lies is a valuable book within the classroom setting. It will help student development of empathy and understanding of the mystery genre. The novel can be paired with another rural text such as *People of the Bayou: Cajun Life in Lost America* by Christopher Hallowell to create a unit of life in the Bayou.

FULL FLIGHT

by Ashley Schumacher

(Published in 2022 by St. Martin's Press)

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Different and musically gifted, Weston returned to Enfield, a small town in Texas, after spending a year away because of his parents' divorce. Anna, Weston's duet partner for a saxophone performance in the marching band, is anxiously working on her section of the duet. Their band director recommends that Weston work with Anna. The friendship between central characters, Anna and Weston, quickly turns into romance as they spend time practicing their duet.

Band members describe Wesley, who plays piano and mellophone, as a gifted musician but socially awkward. Community members also suspected Weston had chopped down a "memorial



tree” in the town center although he denies this. Anna, also talented, began saxophone lessons later than most students in the band. Anna laments that she was unable to join the band in fourth grade, when most students begin instrumental lessons, due to her parents’ financial situation. After joining band in the 9th grade, Anna believes she must work harder to compete with other members. Marching band is especially difficult for Anna because she is required to memorize music and step routines.

Full Flight is a relationship novel that will remind readers of the complications and excitement of first love. Both the stress and comradery of actively participating in marching and concert band in high school are authentically portrayed. Any reader who has struggled in a competitive, extracurricular program in school will connect personally with the characters. Although Anna and Weston both view themselves as flawed, they also find strengths in each other as their relationship grows.

Narrated by Weston and Anna in alternating chapters, their characters are relatable and complex as they navigate their relationship and develop identities in the fictional Texas town of Enfield. Authentic supporting characters also add to the plot, especially Anna’s family members, who are, at first, suspicious of Weston. Weston’s public identity as a strange musical genius, conflicts with his private persona while Anna admits that her positive attitude is often a facade covering anxieties.

Early in the novel, Weston discovers a report he had written on the now extinct Kaua’i’o’o bird, indigenous to Hawaii. In his report, Weston describes the song of one single male Kaua’i’o’o bird found in 1986 by scientists, its mate thought to have perished in a hurricane (Schumacher, 2022, p.9). Pondering the report on the bird and the eventual extinction of this genus of honeyeaters, Weston thinks about his own loneliness before he met Anna. The bird, whose last song was digitally recorded, is mentioned throughout the novel as a symbol for Weston and Anna’s relationship, along with their passion for music (American Bird Conservancy, 2015).

Teachers will want to recommend this novel to middle or high school students involved in music or other extracurricular programs in school. This book would also illicit classroom conversations about public vs. private identities through the lenses of Anna and Weston. The history of the extinct Kaua’i’o’o’o bird family adds to the creativity of the novel, and teachers could assist student in analyzing the literal and symbolic meanings associated with the bird and the multiple meanings of “endangered” and “extinction.”

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