Colleen Brown

Orange Houses LENS

Critical

Orange Houses follows the story of three very different children growing up in the modern world. Though from three completely different life experiences, Fatima, Tamika, and Jimmi become a support system for each other to survive. Placing her characters in a modern and unforgiving world gives readers a new perspective on issues and policies that affect America today. If a teacher were to use such a book in their young adult classrooms I think that it would prove to be helpful in opening their minds on these issues. Sometimes students believe whatever it is that their parents have told them but these are issues that won’t go away in the near future and so students need to see more than just one side of the argument.

Jimmi is a veteran of the wars in the Middle East. Griffin uses him to show the great divide between the veteran’s feelings and how others feel about the veterans. A lot of people in America expect veterans to move on when they return to the States, get a job, and reincorporate themselves into the culture of America. Jimmi has trouble doing this. Not only did he suffer injuries in the war, and probably suffers from PTSD, he also lost his means of a future when his girlfriend kills herself. He turns to drugs to cope with this double blow. While there are many people who do try to help Jimmi, like Joe, there are just as many who write Jimmi off as a druggy or as crazy, like Tamika’s mom. However, this story is all too true for many veterans returning from war. Not every veteran will need the same things and society needs to be able to understand the many feelings that come along with war.

Tamika is a young girl who is hearing impaired. She faces the choice in the book to get new hearing aids to replace her old ones. To her this is something she doesn’t want to do since her method of coping with things is to shut out the world by turning her aids off. In today’s world this is another issue that has been raised. The deaf community is split on issues like cochlear implants and whether they are the right decision for their children. Many families struggle with this decision and some decide that they would rather not get them. This is something only someone who has experienced hearing loss could understand which is why Tamika feels a disconnect from her mother and Joe even though they are just trying to help her. This issue has become a major problem as technology has improved the quality of hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Then there is Fatima a girl who escapes the terror in her own country in Africa and comes to the United States illegally. Illegal immigration has been a hot topic in the news for decades. However, when people think of illegal immigrants they generally believe all of the stereotyped images of immigrants. Not just the illegal ones either. If they’re from Mexico (or really anywhere in Central and South America) they are generally thought of as job stealers who can’t speak English. If they are from Africa or the Middle East they might be seen as terrorists even though they might have left their countries to flee terror. It’s just as sad thing that people today do not accept immigrants even when our own country was founded by immigrants. Admittedly, immigrants in the past had their differences and fought with each other but the ideal America is a place where immigrants are made welcome.

All of these characters represent three very different but very relevant perspectives of life in America in the twenty-first century. While students may not have had the same situations in their own lives they will be able to understand the message behind each one and it will give them something to think about. These issues are things that they will have to attempt to fix in their own generation to help improve the life of all Americans so that America becomes the country our forefathers wanted it to be.