Babylon Boyz Short Guide

Babylon Boyz by Jess Mowry

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

A small group of boys—they call themselves "homeys" and deny that they are a gang—struggle to survive amid poverty, drug abuse, and the fear of deadly violence.

They try to live honest, moral lives, even while carrying guns and knives for protection. When the local crack dealer is chased by rogue cops and ditches his newly purchased bag of cocaine, the boys are placed in an intense moral dilemma. Taking the bag for themselves, they must decide whether to flush away the cocaine, thus eliminating some of the poison that contaminates their community, or to sell the cocaine and receive enough money for Dante's desperately needed heart operation and enough to send Pook to medical school. They must make their decision in a corrupt world that tempts them to their own destruction. Their moral compass is a vague belief in "Jah" combined with a conviction that they want to better their lives honestly. Babylon Boyz is a raw, frank, unflinching portrayal of young adults in crisis.

About the Author

Much of Jess Mowry's life is still a mystery, even though he has attracted the attention of Hollywood and the literary community. One published account of his life says that he was born in Oakland, California, but the publishers of his novel Way Past Cool, Farrar Straus Giroux, claim he was born in Mississippi. In any case, both sources list his birth on March 27, 1960.

Mowry grew up in Oakland, where he was raised by his father.

Educated only through the eighth grade, he spent much of his teen-age life on the streets of Oakland, even working briefly as a bodyguard for a drug dealer. As an adult, he has worked as a garbage hauler and yard cleaner. A strong concern for the welfare of youngsters led him to volunteer to work with children's organizations, bringing with him the experience of once being a youth on the streets of Oakland.

In 1988, using money he earned by recycling aluminum cans retrieved from dumpsters, Mowry purchased a used typewriter for eight dollars and began writing stories about early adolescent gang members living in the grittier parts of Oakland. These stories became Rats in the Trees, which won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award in 1990. At the time these stories were published, Mowry called a bus his home.

With the publication of Way Past Cool, he went from struggling for publication to the New York Times best-seller lists, receiving praise for his realistic account of the lives of early adolescents in the toughest parts of Oakland. In Way Past Cool, he demonstrated his mastery of the dialect of the young people who were his subjects and his ability to present their lives without sentimentality. Its sharp portrayal of unpleasant lives with unflinching candor has resulted in the novel often being placed in the adult section of libraries rather than the young adult section. Way Past Cool attracted the interest of motion picture producers, but Mowry soon earned the reputation of being hardnosed about how his work would be presented. The author turned down large offers of money in fear that the subject matter of his work would be compromised by Hollywood producers searching for a good story. It took until 1998 for Way Past Cool to be made into a motion picture. His insistence that the young people of his fiction be honestly presented, even to the point of rejecting money that would make his life considerably more comfortable, has probably made a permanent imprint on the public perception of his persona—as a selfless man more committed to children than to himself.

Setting

The main characters of Babylon Boyz call their city "Babylon," meaning a place where evil reigns supreme, though the city is probably based on Oakland, California. In the high school the boys attend, youngsters carry knives and guns, finding ways to dodge the metal detectors they must pass through when they enter the campus. Violence at school is part of the routine, and the school even has its own drug dealer, Bam-Bam.

The city outside the school is even more dangerous—children move cautiously, always tense because terror can erupt at any time. The streets have drug dealers, panhandlers, and thugs. Young adults carry guns as a defense against a society that treats them as prey. Dante's father, Matthew, remarks, "Babylon sell its own children, an' the price keep gettin' lower all the the time." On the streets, in stores, and in apartments, people are in danger all the time, and death can visit suddenly in the form of guns or knives. Death can also result in a split second of indecision, as it does for Mr. Pak.

Mowry portrays a Babylon that is a hell; it is a place that he says he grew up in and knows well. The lives his high schoolers have are ones from his own experience. In portraying Babylon as he does, he says he hopes to call attention to youngsters he thinks most of America would just as soon forget. The youngsters are not particularly noble, but they do recognize the evil around them for what it is, and they try to resist it, until temptation becomes unbearable.

Social Sensitivity

A novel about social issues, Babylon Boyz features the independent-minded views of a talented, uncompromising author, making all of the book socially sensitive. One significant element is homosexuality. Pook is not only enormously physically talented—he could be a fine athlete if he wished— he is a freshman in high school who has decided that he is gay. The frankness with which his friends and he discuss his homosexual interests is notable for its absence of preachiness or partisanship. Even so, his eventual sexual relationship with Jinx may disturb some readers, although not so much for the relationship itself as for Pook's seeming to take advantage of a drunk, unintelligent boy—a view expressed by Dante.

Sexuality in Babylon Boyz can be a tease— for instance, girls' breasts are detailed. On the other hand, as much as Dante wants his first experience of sexual intercourse to be sentimental, it is not. It is exciting, quick, and disappointing when Dante realizes that Jasmine was doing it for money. It serves to emphasize how unappealing to Dante is his own body, with its underdeveloped chest and weakness caused by heart disease. Sexual intercourse can also be rape; at the novel's end, Radgi is revealed to be a girl pretending to be a boy. She pretends to be a boy because she knows that homeless girls are stalked by predators who rape them.

Learning this the hard way, Radgi is pregnant with a child fathered by Air Touch.

There is nothing romantic about her experience, and her refusal to go to a hospital to give birth serves to show the great extent to which the youngsters fear government authorities and a system that they believe harms rather than helps them.

Dante's heart disease opens a world of social issues, the most poignant of which is his inability to have the heart operation he needs. His wistful vision of sailing to Jamaica becomes no more than a daydream because of his heart's gradual deterioration; he will not live long enough to fulfill such dreams. It is Dante's curse to be poor in a country that provides little medical care for those who cannot afford it. Health insurance costs money that poor citizens like Dante do not have. For Dante, charity ends outside the hospital door.

The heart defect stems from Dante's mother's use of cocaine during pregnancy, a common problem for children of mothers who use the drug. Mowry takes pains to show most high schoolers rejecting cocaine and other drugs—even showing contempt for drug addicts, including those trying to kick their addiction. When Dante foolishly pretends to have had a cocaine problem, the girl who was interested in him snubs him and declares that she will have nothing to do with drug users. Even so, drug abuse is a significant problem in Dante's neighborhood. Much of the violence and other crime of the area stems from the dealing of drugs. Cold-blooded murder seems to be an everyday consequence of the drug trade, and Dante, Pook, and Wyatt live in a terrifying world in which anyone can be murdered at any time. Mr. Pak and Kelly become victims of the lust for the money that selling drugs provides.

In Babylon Boyz, efforts to fight drugs, notably crack cocaine, are ineffective, even silly. Corrupt police officers have joined the enemy and are among the last people the youngsters would call for help. There is a local rehabilitation center in an old storefront. It is run by a white woman who seems earnest but out of touch with the reality of street life. Jinx, who attends meetings at the rehabilitation center frequently, constantly babbles weird phrases that seem almost academic, but which he plainly does not understand. Dante's visit with him to the clinic explains why Jinx talks the way he does: "Hello, Dante. My name is Ms. Conrad, and we all welcome you to your state-sponsored, behavioral-stabilization, self-image-enhancement and socioeconomic empowerment program. Your supportive peer-group will now introduce themselves."

Everything about the rehabilitation center is bizarre psychobabble, with a heavy dose of California New Age claptrap thrown in.

When Dante is taken to sit alone in a locked room, Ms. Conrad says: The first step in your rehabilitation process will be a period of self-assessment and inner-child evaluation. While your testimony suggests that you may have a congenital addictive-inclination, you should nevertheless disregard environmental and racio-socio-economic factors as being justifiable sanction for majorital culture estrangement, leading to social disempowerment, which has resulted in chemical dependency.

Even the exceptionally bright Dante responds the way Jinx does: "Zuh?" Dante observes that "it was so way past stupid that just the light from the stupid would take ten years to get here!"

These passages are reminiscent of another social novelist, Charles Dickens. For instance, Dickens writes of a woman so caught up in her passion to help children in Africa that she neglects her own children, who live in rags and filth. Her babbling sounds like that of Ms. Conrad, and it mixes comedy with sadness, as does the gibberish of Ms. Conrad. Indeed, the sheer idiocy with which the problems of Babylon are addressed often has an insane, comic edge to it because outsiders have no idea what life is really like for Dante and other young adults in his part of the city and therefore offer up meaningless solutions that fit the fashion of the moment. Just before his murder, Mr. Pak sums it up harshly, asserting that people live in "a strangling system of laws no one valued."

The police make few appearances in Babylon Boyz, but as in Mowry's other fiction, they tend to be ineffective, indifferent, or outright corrupt. The portrayal of the police officers in Babylon Boyz could be very disturbing to some readers; they speak in racist epithets, and they brutalize a prisoner and then rob him. They have chased Air Touch to the docks not to arrest him for trafficking in cocaine but to take from him a large amount a cash they believe he is carrying. Dante and his friends hide from the police because the police have joined with the enemy, the criminals who make Babylon hell. The frank, sometimes contemptuous portrayal of police officers seems biased, not offering them the same opportunity for a mixture of human traits afforded to other characters. However, they are seen through the eyes of the youngsters who fear them, and their fear makes the police look like monsters. Many readers may object to such a view, but

Mowry insists he writes from his own experience as a young adult growing up in Oakland.

Literary Qualities

The narrative of Babylon Boyz is written mainly in Standard English. Grammatical liberties are rare and could merely be typographical errors, for instance, "drank" when "drunk" is meant. However, when using dialogue, Mowry preserves the casual language of the street in his conversations, using colorful but often non-Standard English. The articles "the" and "a" are often dropped, words are often jumbled in their order, "be" is used when "is" or another form of "to be" is meant, and dropped letters and syllables are common, represented by an apostrophe. The dialect is vibrant, a lively patois that helps define the characters and how they relate to one another. The technique succeeds in part because Mowry has taken much care that his underlying narrative be crisply clear.

Themes and Characters

At the center of Babylon Boyz is a classic, powerful conflict of interest for its main character, Dante. It is Shakespearean in its intensity and its meaning. Hamlet faces choices no more difficult to make than those Dante must make, and the social implications of what choices Dante makes are nearly as profound. Embodied in Dante is a profound conflict between self-interest and the welfare of the community.

Dante and his "homeys" are well-drawn figures, each a unique personality. Dante himself is thirteen years old, bright but physically underdeveloped because he has a diseased heart caused by his mother's use of cocaine while she was pregnant with him. He speaks bitterly of having a chance to live to be thirty years old if he is careful.

In contrast to Dante, Pook has a magnificent body. Not only well built and handsome, he is athletically gifted and extraordinarily strong. Even the bullies at school have much cause to fear him. His homosexuality is known throughout the school and is accepted by Wyatt and Dante without much fuss, although Dante finds Pook's relationship with Jinx disturbing. Wyatt is enormously fat—so fat that he can hide a gun under the folds of his large belly. He may not be the brightest of the boys, but he has a sound moral compass and urges that the cocaine that Dante and Pook have found be flushed down the toilet. For him, the welfare of the community outweighs any personal gain.

If self-interest versus the welfare of the community is the central conflict of Babylon Boyz, then the making of choices would be the central theme. Throughout the novel, the "homeys" have important choices to make. One made at the outset is not to use drugs, but the problem that requires the most choices is the discovery of the bag of cocaine. Wyatt makes his choices based on principle—cocaine is evil, and he wants to throw it away. Pook is torn, wanting his friend Dante to be healed and wanting a better life for himself—he regards cocaine as money, and having money is power. It falls to Dante to make the toughest decisions.

His Rastafarian religion offers him some guidance: the city in which they live is Babylon, a place of evil, and Dante infers that cocaine is part of what makes Babylon evil. On the other hand, his heart is dying and without an operation he will perish while still young. He is unhappy with his weak body, afraid of dying young, and angry at a world in which he is just a "black ant" that may be stepped on by society.

Thus he chooses to sell the cocaine to dealers who hang out in a park. The consequences of this choice are horrifying: Kelly and his father, Mr. Pak, are murdered by Air Touch, who is determined to recover his cocaine. Air Touch himself is murdered right in front of Dante because a drug lord is unhappy with how Air Touch handled the problem of the missing drugs. Much evil comes from Dante's effort to sell the cocaine.

On the other hand, Dante is capable of making sound moral choices when thoughts of the operation that would save his life do not cloud his thinking. For instance, he quickly adjusts to the discovery that Radgi is actually a girl. When he thought she was a boy,

Dante offered Radgi safe haven in his apartment while his father was away. He has faith in his father's ability to make a compassionate decision, allowing the young mother to stay with them. When he chooses to care for Radgi, he also discovers in himself the capacity to care for someone else, to put their interests above his own. This decision gives his character complexity and makes the theme of choices an important one in the novel, one with many different aspects and many different consequences.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Wyatt want to flush the cocaine down the toilet right away? Why does Dante choose to sell the cocaine?

Is either character justified in his decision?

2. Why does the white drug lord not have Dante killed?

3. Dante complains, "Ain't nuthin' on the air no more 'cept stupid .. . ganxta rap!" Why does he not like gangster rap? Why do his friends share his opinion of it?

4. Why does Radgi keep her gender secret even from Dante, who is nice to her? Is she wise to do so?

5. The drug lord tells Dante, "Free will isn't free, son. You pay for it every time you make a choice. And even if you choose not to choose, you've made a choice." Is this true? What perspective does it suggest for understanding the events in Babylon Boyz?

6. Are the subjects of sex, homosexuality, drug abuse, and violence appropriate for a book for young adult readers, or should Babylon Boyz have been written for adults? Why would Mowry choose to address his novel to young readers instead of adults?

7. By trying to sell the cocaine, does Dante become part of the evil of Babylon?

8. "This stuff [cocaine] evil!" declares Wyatt. What in the context of the novel makes cocaine evil?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who are Rastifarians? Who is Jah? What is Babylon? How do these beliefs affect the action in Babylon Boyz?

2. Where may a youngster with heart disease and no money to pay for an operation go for help? Are there sufficient resources for America's poor children?

What more, if anything, should be done?

3. What organizations help addicts stay off drugs? What are their methods?

Which are most effective? Do any work like the rehabilitation center in Babylon Boyz?

4. "My dad say Jah already give us a beautiful world, an' we shouldn't gotta smoke somethin' to see it the way He does," says Dante. Is there beauty in Babylon Boyz? Where? What makes it beautiful?

5. Who are the Australian Aborigines?

What is the history of Aborigine immigrants to the United States?

6. What is being done to decrease the violence among America's young people? What seems to work best? Could it help Dante and his friends?

7. Why are Dante, Pook, and Wyatt suspicious of the government and of charities? How would this have developed in inner cities like that of Oakland? Is the suspicion justified?

8. What are the choices Dante must make?

What are the consequences of his choices? What do the choices and consequences express about making decisions based on moral and ethical principles?

9. Why is graffiti a social problem? What harm does it do? Is Wyatt typical of graffiti painters?

For Further Reference

Max, Daniel. "'Cool' Author Gives Hollywood a Cold Stare." Variety 347, 3 (May 4,1992): 310. Max tells about how Mowry has turned down large offers of money for the motion picture rights to Way Past Cool in order to have control over the project.

Pryor, Kelli. "'Cool' and the Gangs." Entertainment Weekly Online. October 25,1991.

www.ew.com. A brief interview with some details about Mowry's life.

"Will Hollywood Get Serious About Black Lit?" Variety 356,2 (January 27,1992): 68.

Details the efforts of filmmakers to buy the motion picture rights to Way Past Cool.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Way Past Cool, Mowry's 1992 work, tells of a gang of early adolescent males who resolve to kill a local drug dealer and thus slow the flow of drugs that are polluting their neighborhood. The drug dealer in Way Past Cool seems more successful and intelligent than Air Touch. Here the dealer has a bodyguard and rides in an automobile more suited to someone who may need to duck bullets than Air Touch's Viper. The demise of each drug dealer is violent, although Air Touch's end seems more pitiful—killed not by angry gangsters but by his white bosses for failing to keep them informed about the lost shipment of cocaine. The young adults in each novel have a gritty realism about them—Mowry exaggerates little about their virtues and their failings.

Jamaica is referred to by characters in Way Past Cool and Ghost Train, as well as in Babylon Boyz. In Way Past Cool and Babylon Boyz, Mowry's 1996 novel, Jamaica is mentioned as a kind of paradise where blacks may live free of racism. Dante speaks of his father saving enough money to afford the fuel necessary for sailing south, through the Panama Canal, and to the Caribbean, where his father could set up a boating business.

In notable contrast, Ghost Train features a young man, Remi, whose family has moved from Jamaica to Oakland in order to escape the oppressive poverty of their homeland.

Remi is impressed by how well fed his schoolmates are and by their good clothing.

In his eyes they are fortunate, and Remi struggles to understand why they consider themselves poor. This suggests that Mowry does not mean that Jamaica is really a better place to live when youngsters mention it in Way Past Cool and Babylon Boyz. Instead, Jamaica is like Jah; it is a symbol of a vaguely formed hope that there is a better place to live than Babylon, that there is a place free of racism.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996