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Review: After Tupac & D. Foster

Rachel Schwedt

Liberty University, reschwed@liberty.edu

Janice A. DeLong

Liberty University, jadelong@liberty.edu

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Woodson, Jacqueline, *After Tupac & D. Foster*. G.P. Putnam's Sons/Penguin Young Readers Group, New York, 2008 ISBN: 9780399246548, Ages 11 and up Awards: Newbery Honor

Description

There are times when a person walks into the life of another and leaves a footprint that remains forever. Just such a walk-on is “D. Foster” to the nameless narrator of this story and her sister-like friend, Neeka.

The place is Queens, New York, and the time is 1995. Tupac Shakur, the famous rapper, has just been sent to prison when D appears on the block, and her stay parallels tragic events in his life. Amazingly, although the narrator and Neeka are across-the-street neighbors and have been lifelong friends, they readily accept D as a third best friend, feeling even more complete as they do. D, Neeka, and the narrator move from gangly eleven-year-olds to boy-attracting teens by the time “their Pac” is fatally shot in 1997. These milestones in the life and death of the much publicized musician act as bookends to this story.

Each child-to-young-woman is searching with erratic passion for her Big Purpose, just as Shakur seems to be after his release from prison. Each girl struggles with her particular family unit. Each is better equipped to face uncertain futures because of the strength and support gained from the other two.

With authentic voice, Woodson takes readers into Neeka's bustling household of eight, and even to prison to visit her brother, Tash, who was set up to take the blame for a crime committed by his gay crush. The narrator, recognizing herself as the “brainy” one of the trio lives a much quieter life with no brothers, no sisters, and no father. Her mother has gently explained that it is better for everyone if she does not know the man responsible for her conception, and the child seems content with that. Finally, Woodson introduces the enigmatic newcomer who calls herself simply, D Foster. As the book draws to a satisfying conclusion, readers learn the true identity of this child-of-the-System.

Critique

While tackling hurdles such as homosexuality, prison life, and foster care, Woodson balances the struggles of her characters with humor, camaraderie of the highest order, and strong family support systems. Although the language and grammar prevents this book from being a model to follow for sentence structure or vocabulary, the dialogue takes readers right to the front steps of the row houses, and that is, after all, reality in this story.

Themes include trust without full disclosure, the cost of friendship, and acceptance of family members even though their life choices are destructive. Readers also will have confirmed what they suspected—there are neither perfect families nor perfect friendships, but each person is valued and irreplaceable.

Woodson concludes *After Tupac & D Foster*, the latest addition to her ever-increasing list of Newbery Honor books, with a salute to a musician who knew how to make his fans feel that he was “their boy.”

This book is recommended for individual reading, especially for adolescents who *do not* live deep in the city as a fresh look into families and values from that perspective. It is recommended for readers who *do* live on city streets where anyone's mother feels responsible for all children because those readers can identify with the girls. Some language may offend, but the discipline and concern from parents will resonate with all adults who love their teens.