Acid, Projects, and Pit Bulls: Fiction by Paul Griffin

There are plenty of Young Adult books that portray the difficulties of being a teenager. Some are funny, some serious, and some are pretty dark. There's even a name for ones that focus on a specific issue -- the problem novel (you've got your teen pregnancy, drug abuse, suicide -- you name it). Some are great, but often times the more one topic takes center stage, the less realistic these books seem. It's never just one problem in real life, is it? For pretty much anyone at this age, times are hard all around. Paul Griffin [1] writes about hard times.

Griffin burst onto the scene with *Ten Mile River* [2], a story about friendship and how it forces people to make difficult choices. It's about two homeless boys who've survived foster care and juvenile detention and are now living in an abandoned building. Their lives consist of stealing and avoiding the police, and watching each other's backs. A pretty girl brings a glint of hope into their lives, but they both find it difficult to imagine a better life while remaining loyal. *The Orange Houses* [3] is another Griffin book dealing with the trials of inner-city life. A deaf girl, an illegal immigrant from Africa, and a damaged and addicted 18-year-old war veteran somehow manage to make life more bearable for each other, and in the end wind up paying a heavy price in a neighborhood suspicious of anyone not looking out for themselves.

One of Griffin's strong points is his ear for realistic dialog -- the conversations between his characters sound like something people would say in real life. *Stay With Me* [4] is a great example, in which Griffin really captures the voices of a high-school dropout with a gift for rehabilitating abused dogs and a young woman with little prospect of escaping the same life her alcoholic mother is leading. It starts out as a love story, and it's both sweet and frank. When Mack's pit bull is killed and he ends up in jail for a fit of blind rage, the book deals with the pain of losing a loved one truthfully -- everything isn't ok, but just enough is to make life worth living.

Burning Blue [5] is Griffin's most recent book, and the first to be set in a suburb. It's a classic mystery set-up: The most beautiful girl in school has acid thrown in her face, and a troubled outsider takes up the task of finding her assailant, exposing himself to danger from his schoolmates and the law. Jay is a very memorable character whose life is pretty much a mess, between an absent father and his illicit sideline of hacking. He's got trust issues (and rightfully so) and his struggle to protect (as he views it) Nicole without getting arrested or falling in love is fascinating. For her part, Nicole's nearly-impossible task of adjusting to a life where her looks define her in a negative light is just as interesting. The way Griffin takes damaged characters and allows them to realistically help or hurt each other really shines in this book. Any of these titles are great reads if you want something edgy and at the same time relatable. Check one out!

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Posted by Chris H. on Dec 10, 2012

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