

Shine, by Lauren Myracle

Reviewed by Rowan Hilden (Literary Arts 2024)

Shine by Lauren Myracle is a sad, horrifying journey. Between the rampant bigotry and closeted queerness, I was unsure what to make of it. Myracle's settings began as whimsical and nostalgic - all iced tea and sweet, Southern lemonade. However, as *Shine*'s protagonist, Cat, begins to unravel the town's mystery, the darker side of Black Creek, North Carolina comes into sharp focus. Myracle's Black Creek is drenched in poverty and drug use, with the mystery at hand being a violent hate crime against Cat's gay childhood best friend, Patrick, who was beaten so badly that he slipped into a coma. *Shine* documents Cat's journey through her hometown as she attempts to find justice for Patrick by finding his attacker. This quest, however, unravels more secrets than Cat would ever have guessed. Sharp and dark, Myracle's *Shine* approaches topics like poverty and drug use in an authentic and honest way that makes readers question their own surroundings - a clear, bright beam in a literary world so fond of ignoring them.

Cat's relationship to Patrick in *Shine* is the thread that holds this book together. Their shared childhoods are highlighted through the character of Mama Sweetie, Patrick's caretaker. Myracle uses Mama Sweetie to immediately immerse the reader into the small world of Black Creek, North Carolina.

“(Mama Sweetie) couldn’t resist anything sugary, and she spent half her food stamps on Coke and Twizzlers and fun-size Snickers.”

Myracle sneaks details of poverty like food stamps into her sentences casually and effortlessly. She infuses memories of Southern sweetness, ingraining it in the culture of the setting. Because Mama Sweetie only appears at length in the very beginning of the book, she acts as a symbol of the reader's initial impression of Black Creek, with her poverty encapsulating the “vibe” of the town. Myracle's choice to implement these details so soon shows how essential they are to her style of character-driven worldbuilding.

Shine is, first and foremost, a mystery novel. This template allows Myracle to dive into characters that seem small initially. Everyone in Black Creek has a secret, it seems,

and it is Cat's job to figure them out. During Cat's quest to find Patrick's attacker, she visits the house of the popular girl in town. While in her house, she offhandedly takes note of her surroundings.

“I hopped up and hurried down the hall. On the way to her room, I passed another room crammed floor to ceiling with plastic bins, cardboard boxes, and wire hangers.”

Myracle's ability to sneak in this detail of hoarding - while Cat is in motion, no less - shows her ability to quietly include sentences that show the dire situation this town is in while simultaneously moving on very quickly. Myracle grew up in Brevard, North Carolina, and her experience with small town life is evident in the details she includes. Myracle uses action to explain surroundings instead of pausing the scene. The life of this novel is in Myracle's expertly crafted details.

Black Creek is stained by its meth problem. The entire community seems to rely on these hard drugs to get through the day, and as Cat digs into the town secrets, she discovers that nearly everyone she knows is involved. She is harassed by her older brother Christian's friends, Beef and Dupree, who warn her to stop looking for the person who hurt Patrick. Later, she learns that even *they* are involved with meth. Beef's betrayal hits especially hard, as he had protected Cat throughout the book. Learning about Beef's involvement with meth breaks Cat's trust in a way that affects her through the rest of the novel. Myracle uses meth addiction - and Cat's response to it - to show the poverty and despair in Black Creek, something that is essential to the dark mood of the mystery.

This book becomes especially dark and violent as Cat comes closer and closer to discovering the truth of Black Creek. Near the last third of the book, Cat partners up with Robert, a hyper-sexual nine year old boy with fetal alcohol syndrome. Robert knows much more than he should and is frequently left alone to play outside. Unfortunately, this leads him to tag along with Beef, Dupree, and all the other older, teenage meth-users, who are now at the center of Cat's suspicion. Through Robert's insight, Cat learns that Beef has an obsession with telling Robert to not be gay.

“He told me to not go down that f*ggot path, not ever, ‘cause one way or another, f*ggots get what they deserve.”

This comes out of left field for Cat, as Beef was good friends with Patrick, who was openly gay. Myracle uses Robert not only to move the story forward, but also to show the violence, bigotry, and sadness that Black Creek embodies. Myracle infuses Robert with the beliefs of the small town, which Cat attempts to correct. Robert’s character is carefully set up by Myracle to infuse horror into the story in a way that appears to be normalized - making it all the more uncomfortable to read.

Later, readers learn that Patrick was attacked by Beef. The violent nature of the crime - tied to a pole with a gas nozzle shoved down his throat, a slur written on his bare chest - is, without a doubt, terrifying. The most gut-wrenching part of this book, however, is that Beef and Patrick were together romantically. The violence and attempted murder was borne from repressed identity. Beef’s rage, self-hatred, and jealousy of Patrick culminate in his near-death, but where Patrick survives, Beef does not. At the end of the novel, Beef holds young Robert at gunpoint at the top of a cliff while high on meth, shouting for Cat to try and stop him. Eventually, Robert is freed and Beef slips off the top, dying from the height on the lower cliffside. This death is the most disturbing part of *Shine*, because you can see - with extreme clarity - how his environment led him to his death. Myracle’s infusion of the deep problems in Black Creek sneaks up on readers in this final, horrible moment. While *Shine* begins with visions of sweet iced tea and lemonade, Myracle twists the town in ways that make readers uncomfortable and scared. *Shine* forces readers to confront their own surroundings while also making them reflect on the ways that poverty and drug use affect towns with no resources, and Myracle’s subtlety plays no small part. *Shine* puts readers on a journey that can only end in a cold, hard look at the world around them - myself, included.