Book review: *Fate of Flames*

**Girl power meets celebrity culture**

In a fantasy world where demonic creatures known as phantoms regularly terrorize humanity, four girls are chosen as “effigies” to control one of the four elements (fire, water, air, and earth) and fight these attacks. If an effigy dies her powers are randomly passed on to a successor, who takes her place with the other girls. This is the premise of *Fate of Flames*, the first book in a new series by author Sarah Raughley. The success of past effigies means that the number of phantom attacks has decreased, so the effigies are more like celebrities than superheroes, competing against each other for public entertainment. Maia is a normal high schooler, but soon realizes her world is about to change when she becomes the newest effigy. Before she can fully learn how to be an effigy, the girls must face their greatest threat yet, Saul, a villain who can control phantoms.

*Fate of Flames* appeals to a wide audience and has a lot going for it, including girls who fight evil rather than wait for a man to protect them, awesome teamwork, and an intriguing commentary on the dark side of celebrity culture. The world Raughley has built, a future earth that is still recognizable, is complex in both detail and scale, as the effigies travel across the globe from New York to Buenos Aires. The novel starts with a huge bang and is sure to grab a reader’s attention. Even though several facts remain unexplained or unresolved by the end of the story, later books in the series will likely clear this up. The characters are also a bit static, as nobody seems to grow or change as the novel progresses, another thing that will certainly change in future installments. Overall, *Fate of Flames* is a fun and exciting book with proactive badass female protagonists, something we need more of, and is sure to entertain.

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**POSSIBLE TASKS**

- Before reading: Describe whether you prefer to read novels that stand on their own or ones that are part of a series.
- Characters in a work of fiction feel real when they are both round (described in detail) and dynamic (grow or change over the course of the book). Choose a fictional character you are familiar with and explain why the character is both round and why he or she is dynamic.

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**Discussing 13 Reasons Why**

**Teens need to talk about it**

“I’m four episodes in to *13 Reasons Why* has anyone seen it or read the book?” The enthusiasm that filled the classroom when I casually brought up the fact that I was watching the Netflix show was a bit of a surprise. Not only did I find out that most of my grade 11 English students had already watched the show, many of them had read the book, too.

When I first heard about *13 Reasons Why*, I didn’t know that it was based on a novel of the same name by Jay Asher in 2007. But what I did know is that many parents, educators and critics had spoken out against the show because it could be seen as glorifying teenage suicide.

In this work of fiction, the main protagonist, 16-year-old Hannah Baker, commits suicide after being bullied at her school. But before Hannah killed herself, she recorded a set of cassette tapes, one side for each of the 13 reasons she chose to take her life. Each reason relates to a person. Each of those 13 people must listen to her tapes, then pass the set on to the next person. In some way, Hannah takes revenge on her tormentors from beyond the grave, and one large criticism of the show is that some teens might decide to imitate the actions of her character.

To discuss the show and the book, students were invited to share their thoughts and feelings. When asked what they most liked about *13 Reasons Why* my students said the experiences of the characters seemed real to them. The work of fiction vividly describes how various forms of bullying can lead to depression and other negative emotions. It also illustrates how students, teachers and the wider school community deal with the suicide of a fellow student. It was a little disturbing to learn that many students felt that there was no place or nobody at the school to talk about such serious issues. If anything, *13 Reasons Why* showed me that high school students need more opportunities outside of the normal classroom to speak openly about bullying, depression and suicide with teachers and their peers.

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**POSSIBLE TASKS**

- Before reading: What are constructive ways of dealing with cyberbullying?
- Based on what you know about the book or the TV series, do you think parents, educators and psychologists are justified in their criticism that teens might imitate the protagonist’s act of desperation?