

Censorship and Banned Books Project: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* Rationale

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The Miseducation of Cameron Post
by Emily Danforth
Rationale by Sydney Redigan

Grade Level and Audience

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is an appropriate novel for students in grades 9 - 12 because it deals with several themes that are significant to a teenage audience in a thoughtful and sensitive way. In the novel, Cameron Post, the protagonist of the novel, searches for a gay identity in a small, rural town. The novel follows Cameron from ages 11 to 17, so teenage readers will undoubtedly relate to the experiences and emotions that Cameron goes through during these years. The novel's themes of identity, home, and loss are extremely relevant to teenagers as they decide who they will become as adults, prepare to leave their homes, and deal with the loss of their childhoods.

This novel is also significant to teenagers because it deals with the subject of homosexuality in a sensitive and thoughtful manner. For teenagers who may be exploring their own sexuality, they may find they have much in common with Cameron and can relate to many of her experiences. For other teenagers, the novel offers them a chance to see the unique struggles and issues that gay teenagers face and may perhaps make them more empathetic toward their peers.

Finally, Cameron's experience of being "different," may also speak to students who are "different" in some way, whether racially, economically, or religiously. The experience of feeling as though one does not fit in is felt by many teenagers. Cameron's struggle to fit in and ultimately embrace her difference provides a poignant lesson for teenagers about being true to one's self.

Due to some sexual references, drug and alcohol use, vulgar language and reference to self-harm, this book is most likely not appropriate for readers below the 9th grade. Readers in grades 9-12, however, should find both the content and reading level appropriate.

Plot Summary

The Miseducation of Cameron Post begins in the summer of 1989 and the reader is introduced to the narrator and protagonist, Cameron Post, a twelve-year-old girl living in Miles City, Montana. On a hot summer day, Cameron and her best friend Irene Klauson share a kiss, causing Cameron to feel both extremely guilty and excited. Later that night, Cameron learns that her parents have been killed in a car accident while camping. Cameron's Grandma Post and Aunt Ruth move in to the family home and in the months following her parents' death, Cameron becomes obsessed over her kiss with Irene, wondering if her parents somehow knew about it and if that could have caused their death.

Cameron spends the summer before high school competing on the swim team where she meets Lindsey Lloyd, an out and experienced lesbian from Seattle who spends her summers in Montana. Lindsey and Cameron develop a romantic relationship and Lindsey acts as a sort of mentor to Cameron. Lindsey's stories about the pride and acceptance of gay people in Seattle contradict everything Cameron has learned at the church her Aunt Ruth has forced her to attend. Lindsey returns to Seattle and Cameron begins high school

In high school, Cameron meets Coley Taylor, a beautiful cowgirl who lives on a ranch. Cameron and Coley soon become close friends and Cameron attempts to ignore her romantic feelings for Coley, helped by the presence of Coley's boyfriend, Brett. The following summer, Brett joins a travelling soccer team and Cameron and Coley begin a secret, physical relationship.

After almost being discovered by Coley's brother, Coley confesses to her mother about the relationship, saying that Cameron had corrupted her. The church pastor and Cameron's aunt and grandmother are alerted and all agree that Miles City is not a good place for Cameron to be and that she would be enrolling in God's Promise, a facility to reform homosexual teens.

Cameron arrives at God's Promise in the fall and soon makes friends with two other "disciples," Jane Fonda and Adam Red Eagle. Their friendship keeps them from "forgetting themselves," something that seems to happen as a result of the work that is done at Promise. Cameron realizes that what she is being taught at Promise is beginning to make an impact on her and weigh her down. The addition of group support sessions compounds this feeling as she hears the horrific stories of what many of her peers have gone through as a result of being gay. During one session, Mark Turner, the model disciple, begins acting strangely saying that his progress has not been enough for his father. The next day the disciples find out that the night before Mark had tried to kill himself by mutilating his genitals with a razor and bleach. J

Jane, Adam and Cameron decide they need to escape Promise and begin planning for an escape in June. Cameron decides that in her last month at Promise, before escaping, she will be honest in her sessions with Lydia, the strict assistant director, so that she can perhaps figure out some things about herself. Cameron realizes that their escape plan must include a trip to Quake Lake, where her parents died. During her last session with Lydia, Cameron comes to realize that her parents' death was not a result of her kissing Irene, that their lives were not a lesson for her, but that they were full people leading their own lives. At the end of the session Cameron says she is "ready to move on." Adam, Jane and Cameron escape with the pretense of going for a hike. They head for Quake Lake and arrive at dark. Cameron feels the need to get in the water, so she takes a candle and ventures into the water alone. She acknowledges that all of her life so far has

felt tied to Quake Lake and she wants to just soak in it, so she spins around until she is dizzy, then blows out the candle and swims back to shore, feeling a sense of closure. Adam and Jane had made a fire on the beach and set out dinner. Cameron looks forward to the world beyond the shore, the forest and the mountains.

Literary Qualities and the Value in Reading

The Miseducation of Cameron Post has many literary qualities and there is a great deal of value in reading this novel. From a technical standpoint, this novel holds many positive qualities for high school readers. Through the character of Cameron, Danforth offers a unique narrative voice and example of characterization, two literary elements that are important for high school students to understand. Danforth also makes good use of symbolism in this novel, particularly through the VHS tapes and Cameron's dollhouse of stolen objects. Students who read and study this novel will gain a better understanding of how symbolism functions in a novel. Setting is also an important literary element in this novel. The setting of Montana is presented as both restricting in its social norms and freeing in its vast physical landscape. Students who read and study this novel will come to a better understanding of how setting can affect the plot and themes of a novel. Lastly, Danforth writes skillfully and interestingly, providing rich imagery and details.

Kirkus notes many of these elements of the novel. The site's review notes:

Carefully crafted symbols — a dollhouse into which Cam puts stolen trinkets and mementos, the lake where her mother once escaped disaster only to die there 30 years later — provide a backbone for the story's ever-shifting array of characters and episodes, each rendered in vibrant, almost memoirlike detail. (Kirkus)

The themes of this novel also hold many positive qualities for high school readers. The book deals with several themes that are significant to all people, but particularly, to teenagers. First, the novel deals with the theme of identity and the search for identity. Identity is something that all human beings possess and the search for identity is a common experience, especially as people come of age and discover who they want to be. Cameron Post, the protagonist of the novel, searches for a gay identity in a small, rural town. While many readers may not be able to relate directly to this experience, the idea of not fitting in and learning to embrace aspects of the self that make one different is a common experience and a theme that speaks to all people. Cameron goes through many phases during her search for identity, such as rebelling, quitting the search, and taking back up the search. Many teenage readers will identify with this journey of self-discovery and will relate to the many struggles Cameron faces while trying to find an authentic identity. Kirkus also acknowledges the value of this theme, noting, “Even when events take a dark and gut-punchingly inevitable turn, the novel remains at its heart a story of survival and of carving out space even in a world that wants one's annihilation” (Kirkus).

A second, related, theme of the novel is finding a place of one's own. Cameron's home of Miles City, Montana often feels stifling. Throughout the novel, Cameron comes to realize that home can be wherever she chooses to go and that she is not tied down to the place she comes from. Many teenagers experience ambiguous feelings toward home and the place they come from and will be able to relate to Cameron's experience. A final, related, theme of the novel is loss. Early in the novel, Cameron loses both of her parents during an accident. The loss of loved ones and a resulting loss of innocence remain important throughout the novel. Teenagers will likely be able to relate to the notion of loss, whether it is a physical or emotional one. These

losses help Cameron define her identity and have a lasting effect on the person she becomes. Many readers may recognize how loss has similarly affected them.

Overall, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a moving and well-written novel that conveys themes that are appropriate for and meaningful to a young audience and provides technical literary elements that are important for high school students to understand. Teenagers in particular will be able to identify with Cameron and learn something about their own identity and place in the world by reading this novel.

Possible Objections

The following list includes possible objections that may be raised against *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Because this is a novel with a gay protagonist, people who hold certain beliefs may object to the theme of and references to homosexuality in the novel. Danforth, however, presents homosexuality in a way that is sensitive and nuanced. The character of Cameron has conflicted beliefs about her own identity and struggles internally to accept this aspect of herself. Many teens who also struggle with accepting part of their identity may identify with Cameron's struggle and teens who are not struggling may become more compassionate by reading about Cameron's struggle. Additionally, the characters in the book who hold homophobic beliefs are also nuanced and are in no way completely villainized. While the book centers around a gay character, Danforth writes about homosexuality with an honest and even-handed approach that acknowledges religious and social objections yet urges for compassion and acceptance.

Other objections that may be raised are sexual references, drug use, alcohol use, vulgar language and self-harm. The sexual references in the book are never explicit or graphic.

Similarly, the drug and alcohol use in the book are only mentioned and are framed in a way that shows how the characters use drugs and alcohol to rebel or escape. They are in no way glorified. There is some vulgar language in the novel but it is not excessive and it rings true to how many teenagers speak. Lastly, the novel features an incident of self-harm. This incident is only referred to and is treated very seriously and is not at all glorified. This incident affects the characters in the novel in a profound way and is central to the plot of the novel.

Possible Objections:

Homosexuality

Sexual references

Drug use

Alcohol use

Vulgar language

Self-harm

Author Information

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is Emily Danforth's debut novel. It received positive reviews from Kirkus, Booklist, Publishers Weekly, and *School Library Journal*, as well as the *LA Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Seattle Stranger*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and NPR. Danforth has an MFA in Fiction from the University of Montana and a PhD in English-Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her short fiction has won the International Queer Writing Award from the U.K.'s *Chroma Magazine* and the George Garret

Award from *Willow Springs* journal. She teaches creative writing and literature courses at Rhode Island College in Providence.

Suggested Teaching Objectives

1. To explore the theme of identity and Cameron's search for identity in the novel.
2. To have students apply the theme of identity to their own lives.
3. To examine the role that setting plays in this novel.
4. To analyze the use of symbolism in the novel.
5. To explore the themes of difference and acceptance in this novel.
6. To have student apply the themes of difference and acceptance to their own lives.
7. To examine the use of voice in the novel.
8. To explore the theme of family and home in the novel.
9. To have students apply the theme of family and home to their own lives.

Works Cited

“Best of 2012: *The Miseducation of Cameron Post.*” *Kirkus Reviews*. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.

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