

YA Book Review

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# THE NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE AND DEPICTIONS OF TRAUMA IN *A HEART IN A BODY IN THE WORLD*

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Putting together a pithy summary of Deb Caletti's 2018 YA novel *A Heart in a Body in the World* is difficult, because the premise—a high school senior running cross country from Seattle to D.C. after a tragedy—completely fails to capture the reason you should read this novel. Yes, the physical feats are interesting, and our protagonist's youth plays an important role in her journey, but the reason you *have* to read *A Heart in a Body in the World*? No other book, for me, has so viscerally captured the experience of recovering from trauma.

The book runs in two alternating narratives: in the present day, Annabelle Angelli runs 16 miles a day, almost every day, filled with almost unspeakable pain. In flashbacks, Annabelle is a mostly happy high schooler, going to class and getting over a break-up. As Annabelle gets closer to her geographical goal in the present, she and the reader slowly progress, in flashbacks, towards the tragedy that drives her run. This approach to telling Annabelle's story doesn't merely serve as an interesting feature of the novel's craft; rather, it locks the reader into Annabelle's perspective. For Annabelle, time is not linear. The past is omnipresent, ready to emerge at a thought.

The non-linear storytelling that Caletti employs makes Annabelle's physical and emotional work feel all the more difficult, and her victories all the sweeter. When we do finally reach the tragedy, we reach it because Annabelle is ready to get there, ready to remember it carefully but purposefully, because she has done the brutally hard work of healing during her journey. Her work was not done alone, either: along the way, a community of family and friends support her in a myriad of ways. Dealing with trauma is intensely personal, but Caletti also shows how recovery needs community. People are reaching out to Annabelle, and Annabelle is having to relearn how to reach back.

In the classroom, this book presents some great opportunities to start (or to continue) drawing students' attention to craft in writing, as the novel's structure is highly deliberate. One possible activity to facilitate this could be to have students (alone or in groups) mark a physical map with the locations Annabelle is running through and note the events that occur in that location and what flashbacks happen in that location. This enables students to visualize Annabelle's journey more concretely and to keep track of the two parallel narratives more clearly and begin to make connections between the two. Caletti's technical skill in this novel is very apparent in its structure and also used to great emotional effect (not always a guaranteed combination!), making this a good text for starting to ask students *how* the novel is eliciting their emotional response.

*A Heart in a Body in the World* utilizes craft to produce an incredible experience—visceral and painful, but ultimately beautiful and joyful, too. The book asks, "how do we go on living in the face of immense grief?" and then ultimately answers its own question: "with immense love."

As much as I recommend reading and teaching this novel, the subject matter is remarkably intense, and it certainly isn't best practice to retraumatize our students or confront them with a text they are unprepared for. I'm an advocate for content warnings for any book in the classroom, but with *A Heart* especially I think students should know what they're getting into. In that vein, teaching this as a whole-class text might not be the best approach to this novel: offering it as a small group or independent text would likely be more appropriate for your students.

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### Author Biography

Caroline Erickson is a Kansas poet studying Creative Writing and Secondary English Education at Wichita State University. She serves as Undergraduate Assistant Editor for the journals *Mikrokosmos* and *mojo* and works as a 9th grade classroom tutor for GEAR UP. Her work can be found in the Spring 2020 issue of *After the Pause* and in the anthology *Nuances*. She can be reached at [emerickson@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:emerickson@shockers.wichita.edu).