

YA Book Review

THE ULTIMATE YOUNG ADULT CHRISTMAS ROMANCE: *WHAT LIGHT* BY JAY ASHER

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What Light (2016) is a young adult novel that follows Sierra and the drama that accompanies her changing life. Jay Asher creates a romantic and idyllic setting full of corny, heart-warming holiday traditions and exciting young love. If you're searching for a light-hearted and easy read during the Christmas season, look no further. I cannot imagine that anyone would challenge its presence in your classroom library, no more than they would challenge *It's A Wonderful Life* or *A Christmas Story*.

Sierra's family makes a living by raising and selling Christmas trees. They spend the majority of their year on their farm in Oregon, but they make the move to the California coast each year to sell their trees. So, Sierra lives two lives. She goes to school in Oregon and works on the farm in her free time. She has two best friends, Elizabeth and Rachel, and loves her life with them. But Sierra also loves her life in California. She loves the Christmas season and all of her family's traditions. She spends each holiday season with her best friend from California, Heather.

Everything in Sierra's life is going according to plan, that is until she learns that this year could be the last time she spends Christmas in California. Sierra's parents won't be able to keep the lot open on the coast next year. They will have to shift their business in order to keep making a living.

With this being her last year, Sierra is determined to make it memorable. She continues her traditions with Heather, but she is quickly snagged by a distraction: Caleb. He is the cute boy who frequents the tree lot. He buys trees for families who can't afford them, and that is how Sierra meets him. They are instantly drawn to each other, but Caleb has a messy past. Previous conflict with his sister has tarnished his reputation, causing loads of drama in their blooming relationship. She has to convince everyone around her, including her reluctant parents, that Caleb isn't anything like the rumors claim. Caleb and Sierra have to fight against the odds to make their relationship work, and of course, love prevails in the end.

One of the things that I like best about this novel is the main characters, Sierra and Caleb. Sierra is a confident young lady, sure of herself and what she expects out of the people around her. We learn early in the novel that she has high expectations when it comes to dating relationships, and she tends to avoid boys because they never meet these expectations. She has no problem denying

any advances made by the boys around her, especially those boys who work for the family's Christmas tree lot.

She is also extremely strong-willed. She is not one to back down from confrontation, especially when it concerns the people she loves. When a local family treats Caleb terribly in the grocery store, she is quick to jump to his rescue. She attempts to defuse the situation with civility, but when that fails, she does not hesitate to defend Caleb and put a judgmental woman in her place.

In contrast, Caleb is much more soft-spoken and willing to accept whatever life throws at him. He is an extremely kind young man who spends all of his tip money buying Christmas trees for families who can't afford them. He personally delivers each tree, expecting nothing in return. When he encounters prickly people and families who don't show much gratitude, he brushes their attitude off without a care. I have a soft spot for Caleb and his selfless acts of holiday cheer.

The main issue I have with this book is how corny and cheesy it is. The drama and conflict are typical of stories in this genre and tend to be just as cheesy as the love-y scenes. As a hard-edged realist, I can't help but think that all of the issues in the story would never happen in real life, and if they did, then they could be easily resolved with minimal communication and drama.

However, I understand that not all books are meant to be full of deep, life-altering realizations and world-changing statements. Reading is also about pleasure and escaping the real world for a little while. *What Light* could be the perfect book for that category. If someone is reading to escape and to find enjoyment in a cute story, this book is a great option for them. They will fall in love with the characters, the setting, and the cheesy moments sprinkled throughout. The story is an easy read, perfect for hopeless romantics of all ages. It lacks any inappropriate scenes and showcases a healthy, innocent relationship that can be admired.

I appreciate everything that Jay Asher creates in his novel *What Light*. This book is a great one to recommend to those students who are looking for a light read around the holidays. They will enjoy the beautiful setting and the lively characters. Sierra and Caleb are great role models in the modern age. I imagine that it would be suitable and entertaining for those independent reading moments during class days before Christmas Break.

Author Biography

Sydney Nesvold is a Missouri native and Pitt State senior who loves reading, clouds, journaling, long drives, listening to music, dogs, and looking at the sky. After graduation, she plans to begin teaching English at a high school in the four-states region with the goal of sharing her love of language and literature with her students. She can be reached at snsvold@gus.pittstate.edu.