
MONUMENTAL STORIES FOUND IN *WE DESERVE MONUMENTS*

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Abstract

The author reviews the young adult novel *We Deserve Monuments* (2022) by Jas Hammonds, providing a brief summary, historical and contemporary connections, and instructional strategies.

Keywords: young adult novel, Jas Hammonds, *We Deserve Monuments*, racial justice, sapphic romance, racial violence

Winner of the 2023 Corretta Scott King-John Steptoe Award for New Talent, *We Deserve Monuments* (2022) by Jas Hammonds follows Avery Anderson, a 17-year-old about to begin her senior year in high school. All her plans are abruptly stopped when she is uprooted from her life in Washington, D.C., and her family moves to Bardell, Georgia, to care for her terminally ill grandmother, Grandma Letty. Avery is thrust into a hostile environment as deep-rooted conflicts between her mother and Grandma Letty resurface causing tensions to rise. Avery finds herself stuck in the middle as she attempts to uncover the secret causes of their tumultuous relationship. Gradually, Avery breaks down the cold walls of her grandmother and begins to unravel her family history. She explores her roots and discovers how racial violence can ripple down through generations, all while finding love and acceptance she never felt she deserved. Avery finds solace in two girls, her neighbor Simone Cole, whom Avery develops an unexpected crush on, and Jade Oliver, a member of a high-status white family, whose mother's murder remains unsolved.

This novel would be something that captures the attention of a range of students across middle and high school. The familiar themes of high school romance, adjusting to a new environment, and tumultuous family relationships are relatable to most adolescents. Additionally, the elements of sapphic romance and multicultural representation allow a diverse set of readers to see themselves within the story. When including this novel within the curriculum, students can consider how racial violence affects future generations and consider the cost of sharing our stories and discovering difficult truths. It also provides an opportunity to consider the value of connecting to our roots and how this can help discover your identity and authentic voice.

A beneficial learning activity would be an inquiry on prominent American monuments. The novel features monuments of the fictional racist school founder Richard Beckwith. Avery considers who is deserving of being immortalized and why these individuals hardly ever look like her. Students can research prominent monuments in the United States, such as Mount Rushmore, Christ of the Ozarks, or the now dismantled Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia. Students can then consider what notable multicultural figures they have seen represented in monuments—such as Martin Luther King, Jr., George Washington Carver, Harriet Tubman, and Gwendolyn Brooks—and consider how their representation compares to white figures.

Depending on the community in which this book is taught, there could be pushback due to the romantic relationship between Avery and Simone and the critique of many of the white

individuals in the town, including police officers and politicians. Starting the novel study with some background information on microaggressions and systemic racism could prime students for the upcoming subject matter. Should this novel be challenged, educators might consider another impactful text like the winner of the 2023 William C. Morris Young Adult Debut Award *The Life and Crimes of Hoodie Rosen*, which similarly delves into themes of identity exploration and navigating adversity within a new and hostile community.

By addressing potential pushback, educators can deepen students' understanding important topics in *We Deserve Monuments*. Recognizing the universality of its themes, such as identity and belonging, this novel serves as a catalyst for meaningful discussions across diverse readerships.

Author Biography

Haven Massey graduated from Wichita State University in May 2024 with a major in Secondary English Education and a minor in Theatre. She presented at the 2023 Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) Conference and will begin her teaching career at Maize South High School in August. She can be reached at havengrace9@gmail.com.