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Review of *Furia*

by Lisa Nienkark

Furia by Yamile Saied Méndez
Hardcover: 368 pages
ISBN-10: 1616209917
ISBN-13: 978-1616209919
Publisher: Algonquin Young
Readers (September 15, 2020)
Language: English



“Furia! The part of me that had been set free during the game stretched her wings and howled at the sun.”
(p.17)

MRA readers who have embraced the canon of YA fiction promoting racial justice in the United States should consider adding *Furia* by Yamile Saied Méndez to their reading list. In the author’s notes, Méndez posits that American readers should not conflate American racism with racism of other countries, including Argentina, which is the author’s native country and the setting of the book (354). She then convincingly presents how gender intersects with race and ethnicity in this setting, depicting a nuanced, complex, and multi-dimensional experience of discrimination. More importantly, like her previous books for children and tweens, Méndez’s YA debut explores the challenges of self-acceptance, identity, and empowerment.

Méndez draws us into the complex world of seventeen-year-old Camila Hassan—uncertain yet confident, hesitant yet impulsive, obedient yet angry. Camila, also known as *Furia* – Fury—on the soccer field, is a multiracial, multicultural Argentinian high school student with talents and passions. Throughout the book, she pays homage to her Andalusian, Black, Hispanic, Palestinian, Russian, and indigenous ancestry, while also navigating her dream of becoming a soccer professional with secrets and lies in order to defy not only cultural, but also familial expectations and limitations, regarding a woman’s place. “Lies have short legs” (1),



Camila realizes, and her story unfolds as truth trickles into her relationships with her best friend, boyfriend, and family.

In Camila’s Argentina—and likewise in Méndez’s - most girls aren’t “allowed [to play soccer] ... because of the stigma” (Simeon, 2020). When Camila was younger, her father berated her publicly for playing soccer, reminding her it was only for men. Additionally, her working class parents make sacrifices to send her to a private school with the expectation that she will become a doctor. In an ironic twist, this education also provides Camila an opportunity to gain a license to teach English. The first and longest-standing short-legged lie is Camila using her private school’s college prep study sessions as a cover for soccer practices and games; it staggers about from its own heavy weight, precariously posed to fall as social media has the potential to out this lie.

Camila’s older brother Pablo, a rising regional soccer star, knows his sister’s soccer secret, and he also warns her against her former neighborhood boyfriend for a hot minute, who happens to be an impressive rookie—*El Titán* - in the European soccer leagues. Another short-legged lie occurs when *El Titán* returns home for a weeklong visit. Camila is reluctant to reveal to her best friend and family that she’s been meeting up with *El Titán*; however, his celebrity status merits intense social media. Her best friend finds out about the budding relationship when *El Titán* posts online a photo of them together. The situation is further complicated by the fact that *El Titán* thinks Camila is someone who needs rescuing – by him. He does help her find a

Must Read Texts

job teaching English part-time to earn money for her future, but he is also selfish in wanting her to come abroad to live with him, which would mean Camila would have to give up her professional soccer dreams.

Another challenge that subtly saturates Camila's life is colorism. As previously mentioned, she is a teenager of Andalusian, Black, Hispanic, Palestinian, Russian, and indigenous ancestry, with her dark complexion eliciting ostensibly affectionate nicknames of *Negra* and *Negrita* by family and friends. In an ideal world, we would think that Camila would call people out for these expressions of colorism; however, Méndez notes that would be "unrealistic for [Camila's] character," adding more importantly that "her life is at risk every day just for being a woman—a woman who wants to play fútbol professionally, no less—she wouldn't have the emotional energy to notice or address the nickname, much less call it out" (354). This realistic depiction will resonate with readers who also make choices—inadvertent or intentional, tacit or spoken—about which prejudice or discrimination they have the energy to address. It also reminds readers with privilege of the complex intersection of gender and racism.

These same readers, with or without privilege, will surely be impressed that, despite the multi-faceted challenges she faces, Camila remains true to herself and to the warrior spirit of her female ancestors who burn inside of her. While attending school and playing soccer, Camila starts teaching English at El Buen Pastor, a church that had once been an asylum for disobedient women—nicknamed *Las Incorregibles*, to underprivileged children so she can set aside money to go to the United States. Camila recognizes herself in one of the children and gives the girl her childhood books. Many of these given books, which are written by Argentinian women, are timeless favorites and abundant with female protagonists. When Camila was little, these books inspired her to believe that she "could do impossible things" (342); in turn, Camila gifts that inspiration to the next generation. In particular, readers who are teachers will intuitively recognize this subplot as a means of revealing Camila's developing maturity, altruism, and a mentoring heart. Up until this point in

the narrative progression, Camila has been inspired by the women who have come before her, either in fiction or family, and now she joins this matriarchal host as she becomes an inspiration for this ten-year-old girl.

MRA readers will appreciate this transformation in Camila, but they'll appreciate so much more: a real deadbolt on Camila's bedroom door that functions as literary symbol, a protest march (attended by Camila) that is reminiscent of the march in *All American Boys*, action-packed snippets of soccer games with unexpected results, and realistic dialogue with occasional Spanish here and there. However, I agree with Ron Charles, a *Washington Post* writer who believes that book reviewers should not be "spoilers," so I recommend that readers check their favorite public library or bookstore to immerse themselves fully in Camila's world.

By sharing Camila's story, Yamile Saied Méndez has crafted a fast-paced, engaging story for MRA readers to explore how gender and socio-economic class intersect with race and ethnicity in Argentina. A first step in anti-racist education is to provide opportunities for students to question, analyze, and challenge personal and structural racism. *Furia* provides that opportunity and, more importantly, Camila shows how one determined teenager navigates that terrain while moving forward to attain her dreams.

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