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## The Comfort of Literature in an Age of Uncertainty

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### Cover Page Footnote

Walker, K. T. (2013). *The Age of Miracles*. New York, NY: Random House.

# The Comfort of Literature in an Age of Uncertainty

JORDAN C. GAKLE

**T**he earth is slowing. In Karen Thompson Walker's remarkable debut YA novel, *The Age of Miracles*, eleven-year-old Julia already has her hands full as a pre-teen in her California suburb, but now the unexplained astronomical phenomenon has begun to disrupt the life she once knew and change the world one sunset at a time. The slowing of the earth's rotation gradually lengthens the time between day and night, dramatically changing the course of humanity. While the government tries to remold the new day to fit the 24-hour clock, the country begins to melt into factions; some are religious groups waiting for the rapture, others are people refusing to subscribe to the enforced time, and many are just trying to put one foot in front of the other. Amongst it all is Julia, still trying to figure out what it means to turn 12, lose a friend, or have a crush, particularly on the sweet boy she goes to school with, Seth.

When Julia's best friend Hannah leaves town, Julia watches the life she thought she had crumble before her own eyes. Her twelfth birthday comes and goes; meanwhile her dad begins an affair with her next-door neighbor, and her beloved grandfather goes missing. On top of the familial drama shaking the foundation of Julia's family, her mother becomes ill with a disease born out of the changes in gravity, one that the world dubs "the sickness." While she watches her parents' marriage ebb and flow through the affair and her mother's sickness, quiet and observant Julia acts as a sponge to her surroundings. She soaks in the excitement of spending time with Seth, the pain of her grandfather's accidental death, and the novelty of being a child in a world where the adults do not have answers.

*The Age of Miracles*, released in 2013, is Karen Thompson Walker's first book and her only YA novel to date. In 2019, she released her second novel, this time aimed at an adult audience, titled *The Dreamers*. Like her debut, *The Dreamers* blurs the line between science fiction and reality, shifting its focus instead to an uncontrollable new virus that shakes

a California town to its core. Walker seems to have a sixth sense for this type of literature, the kind that not too long ago we would have let stay confined to the pages of the book; yet, we now watch it unfold every morning on our news channels. While *Miracles* does not explore a viral pandemic, as *Dreamers* does, the degradation of the "normal" world is just as serious. In both novels, Walker depicts the unsettling landscapes in a lyrical prose that sometimes reads like poetry. However, *Miracles* feels a bit more authentic in its portrayal of the core environmental issue. While the virus mysteriously vanishes by the end of *The Dreamers*, Julia does not have the luxury of watching her problems evaporate. She has to learn to live her life knowing the world will never be the same. While Walker creates both worlds with eloquent brush strokes, she finds more success in painting Julia's life in dark reds and bright blues rather than choosing to wipe the slate clean, as she does in *The Dreamers*.

For some readers, the first-person narration by Julia may feel too reflective, but I argue this is the inherent value of reading the book in today's climate. Reading about Julia's feelings regarding her day to day life during a global catastrophe juxtaposes the normal chaos of growing up against the backdrop of a drastically changing planet. In the beginning of the slowing, Julia still goes to school, and she still has her same everyday worries—not unlike the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Life feels almost normal, in fact—until it doesn't. Julia is smart and introspective, and when things begin to change, she can sense it. She narrates, "The shift in the air was barely perceptible at first: a fading. It was the feeling you get when a cloud moves across the sun" (50). With the spirit of a twelve-year-old, but the voice of a girl much older, she takes the reader with her on her journey: making it from one day to the next.

*The Age of Miracles* is science fiction. The earth is not slowing, and people are not dying of gravity sickness. We are not being completely rejected by our planet—at least not yet—but we can still find great comfort in the way the book

explores the feelings of watching the world we know grow further from reality each day. From the factions of people that call it hoax, to the scared children wondering when they will return to their schools again, *Miracles* parallels what is happening off the page. The novel articulates the nuances of going on with life when the world looks different every day. Furthermore, it does so from the perspective of a young girl, making it even more pertinent for the young adults that may not know what they are feeling, or how to voice it. Julia and her family experience loss, love, joy, and friendship, in spite of the state of the world, something that we recognize and mirror in our own lives right now.

Though it might strike the same chord for readers as other YA dystopia, such as *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent* series, *Miracles* feels heavier. While many other dystopian books also feature a strong female protagonist and an unrecognizable world, these books usually drop us immediately into a distant future; meanwhile, *Miracles* allows us to watch the world fall apart little by little, showing how not-so distant that future really could be. It is easier to separate fiction from reality when it looks nothing like our own lives. While there are not teenage gladiator rings, *Miracles* explores a quieter and more unsettling type of dystopia, one that we can begin to see ourselves living through.

I highly recommend this book for anyone, from young adults to seasoned readers, looking for a novel to pick up during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is in the pages of books that we have always seen ourselves, and it is the pages we turn to once again when we look for answers or solidarity while we trudge along through the unknown. *The Age of Miracles* provides a rare slice of solace in a time of complete uncertainty. While we weather the devastating effects of COVID-19, we can see a piece of ourselves in Julia and Seth, on their hands and knees, carving into the wet cement what they want the world to know: “we were here.”

## References

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