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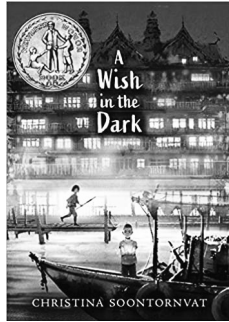
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Review of *A Wish in the Dark: A Middle Grade Novel That Will Get Students Talking*

by Pam Gower

A book that makes kids want to talk is always a good book to put into their hands. After the 2020/21 school year, when I struggled to sustain conferencing and discussions with my students, I am thankful to be placing *A Wish in the Dark*, a novel full of things to talk about—including fairness, mass incarceration, and the power within all of us to make change—into my classroom library.



Pam Gower

A Wish in the Dark by Christina Soontornvat opens in Namwon Prison where women spend their days in the shade of the mango trees just outside the prison fence. During the mango season, the children of Namwon’s inmates’ spend their days gazing at the ripened mangoes that taunt them from above as they dangle out of reach. The children’s crime: being born. Their mothers gave birth to them inside the prison and since their mothers have been labeled criminals, so too have the children.

As the book begins, Pong, a child prisoner in Namwon whose mother died in childbirth, has a knack for knowing the exact moment when the mangoes will drop. He instructs his best friend, Somkit, also an orphan, to move into the perfect position to receive the luscious fruit when the mango “pops” off of the tree. The problem, of course, is that the other kids also want the mangoes, and the worst kind of bullies notice that Somkit is holding a treasure.

When two older girls notice the mango, they demand that Somkit and Pong give it up. Somkit thinks this is a good idea, but Pong refuses to give up what is rightfully theirs. The novel’s central theme jumps right off the page because, for Pong, “he was terrible at ignoring when things weren’t fair” (5). The boys work together

to hold onto what they earned and readers witness, for the first time, the fierce determination of these two beloved characters. This author tells the story through a narrator’s voice that reveals mindfulness and curiosity. For instance, when Pong later realizes that he has made it all the way to the city of Chattana in his prison garbage can escape vessel, Soontornvat describes Pong’s realization this way: “The buzz of orb lights sounded like a swarm of bees flying toward him. He heard shouting and laughing on the shore, a band playing music, and a woman’s voice singing” (36). The effect of the narrator’s storytelling creates that familiar feeling that readers get when they want to rush to the end to find out what happens, yet also want to slow down to consume every delicious detail, just as Pong and Somkit long to eat their mangoes.

A short time after I read *A Wish in the Dark* last fall, I virtually attended the NCTE Middle Level Book Club where I got to meet the author. Soontornvat shared with us what kids wanted to talk about regarding her book. She learned that they really loved the way the narrator shifted between telling the story from the two main characters’ points of view. Readers wanted to talk about mass incarceration, an idea that comes up in the novel.

Soontornvat also shared her creative process for telling the story. She described her method of creating

the world in *A Wish in the Dark* as picking just one magical element. Additionally, since she has visited relatives in Thailand, she placed her magical element into a world based on the culture and landscape of this country. For instance, the magical element is the orbs that can only be lit by the all-powerful governor of Chattana, a fictional city in the novel. After the Great Fire in Chattana that caused so much death, destruction, and conflict, no more fire is allowed; the citizens must pay for the governor's "electricity" in order to have light and heat for cooking and warmth. Social classes are created because of the ways that certain color bulbs cost more than others due to their lasting warmth and light. This element served both the purpose of creating that magic that is so engaging for young readers as well as for setting up the book's ultimate conflict: the governor holds too much power.

Before the governor makes a special visit to the prison, we learn that

Pong's wild and secret wish, the one he didn't tell even Somkit about because it sounded so silly, was that one day he'd work for Chattana's great leader. He imagined standing at the Governor's side as an assistant or adviser, or whatever sort of jobs grown people had. Together they would make everyone's life brighter. (10-11)

During the visit though, Pong creates a disruption and attracts the attention of the governor who then tells him that "light shines on the worthy" implying that Pong is, indeed, not worthy. Pong is devastated and escapes from the prison where he meets Father Cham. Soontornvat described Father Cham as wanting to give compassion to everyone he meets, no matter what. In her talk at NCTE, she explained how she decided early in her storytelling what her characters want and then used this motivation to flavor her character development. This idea seemed brilliant to me! It also inspired me to think of ways that I could incorporate the questions she shared: "What do these characters want? What do these characters need?" I know that I can use these during reading conferences and book studies in my classroom.

A Wish in the Dark would be a great addition to any classroom library for independent reading, book clubs, or even a whole class read. The design of the book is truly a work of art, the kind of book that kids' eyes will be drawn to immediately. I felt so joyful holding this book because the jacket is shimmery, blending the inky colors of night with the soft glow of bright and pastel colors that truly illustrate the title. Lest we judge the book by its well-designed cover, the best thing is that the story and characters will definitely live up to its pretty packaging.

Additionally, there is so much to learn about and practice in this novel. Soontornvat is skilled at inviting her readers to make inferences; she weaves the chaotic action of this story with quiet moments of vivid description, all of which gives readers a chance to be still and think about what they are reading. *A Wish in the Dark* offers readers a story that is fun to read as well as thought-provoking. Christina Soontornvat will pull your readers in with loveable characters that experience the universal joys and challenges of coming of age. Then, she will challenge your thinking about what is truly right and wrong in society. Much like the mangos outside the fence of Namwon prison, Soontornvat tempts her readers to reach just a bit further with each turn of the page and, in doing so, compels both adults and youth alike to figure out how best to escape.

Author Biography

Pam Gower is a teacher at MacDonald Middle School in East Lansing, Michigan. She is interested in multi-media painting, running, and reading as many books as possible. She can be reached at pamela.gower@elps.us.

