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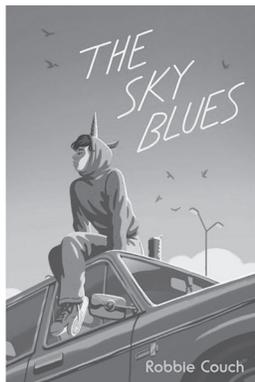
Sweet Romances and Ticking-Clock-Plots: Two Novels for Exploring Identity and Intersectionality

by Kristin Bartley Lenz

We've all felt it as readers. When a character must complete a task by a certain date to avoid suffering consequences, we flip the pages faster. The "ticking clock" is a plot device that builds narrative tension, and the examples of this technique are too numerous to count. Fantasy and action-adventure movies often use this type of countdown to create edge-of-your-seat suspense with spells that will be cast or a bomb ready to explode, yet it's effective in realistic fiction and romance novels too, where the consequences aren't the extreme stakes of life or death.

Here are two debut young adult novels that will hook teens with their creative premises and keep them reading while the clock ticks. Their plots sound similar at first glance: an unknown bully broadcasts the protagonists' personal, private "to-do" lists to the entire school with mortifying and surprising results. Each story is about stretching boundaries, exploring identity, and navigating a first romance, but with very different characters and settings.

The Sky Blues by Robbie Couch (Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2021) begins with the familiar trope of a teen longing to escape a suffocating small town. Seventeen-year-old Sky is white and openly gay but maintains a low profile at his high school in Rock Ledge, Michigan. We find him living at his best friend Bree's house after his mother kicked him out for refusing to conform to her new-found Christian beliefs. Bree's wealthy, boisterous family provides a safe haven when Sky has nowhere else to turn. To cope with his small-town entrapment and



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precarious future, he creates a giant list of splashy ideas for a "gay promposal"—an elaborate presentation that goes beyond simply asking someone to prom—to finish his senior year on a high note. The countdown has begun. In thirty days, he'll propose to his crush, Ali, at the high school's annual beach bum party. As a Muslim and Iraq-American, Ali hangs with the popular crowd, and this adds to the tension Sky feels.

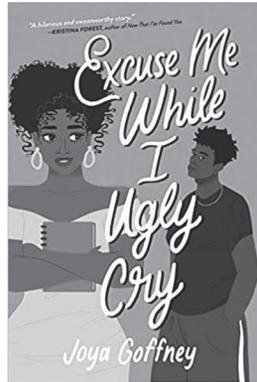
But Sky and Ali's worlds are turned upside down when an anonymous hacker leaks a photo of the promposal list to the entire school and uses homophobic and racial slurs. What follows is a series of twists—as well as heartwarming surprises—as the promposal countdown shifts into a fight for justice. The students rally behind Sky and Ali, a supportive teacher provides a connection and insight into Sky's deceased father, a college scholarship comes through, and a new, unexpected romance blossoms.

The story has plenty of breezy interactions and playful prose, but the exploration of identity and intersectionality adds depth. Sky discovers that even though Ali is popular, he's always felt like an outsider, a brown kid pretending to be part of their majority white high school world. Sky's close friend Marshall is Black, and they both gain a better understanding of allyship. As

Must Read Texts

the clock to prom ticks ever-closer, Sky finds courage and boldness to advocate for himself and others and recognizes that his small-town peers are not as small-minded as he's always thought.

Identity and intersectionality are also major themes in *Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry* by Joya Goffney (Harper Teen, 2021). Seventeen-year-old Black high-school senior Quinn keeps a journal of private lists to cope with her fears and anxieties. She panics when she realizes her Black classmate Carter has mistakenly taken her notebook after a study session. He promises he won't read her deeply personal entries, but before he can return her journal the next morning, he loses it. Thus begins the mystery and the ticking clock.



An anonymous bully now holds the journal, and they post Quinn's "To Do Before I Graduate" list on Instagram for everyone to see at her mostly white high school. Seven tasks are on the list, including one that reveals her big secret: she lied about being accepted into Columbia. If Quinn doesn't complete every item on the list in the eight weeks before graduation, the bully will post more pages of her intimate thoughts.

Quinn teams up with Carter to discover the bully's identity, and she creates new lists showing humor, honesty, and insight. ("Reasons I Don't Belong Here," "The Worst Things About Being Human," "Pros and Cons of Having a Lawyer Mom," "Reasons I Wish We'd Been Friends Sooner".) Carter eventually contributes a few lists of his own, revealing more of himself to Quinn and his feelings for her ("Reasons I Can't Stop Thinking of You").

The story is full of tender and funny moments, but also explores the complexities of race, including stereotyping, internalized racism, and colorism, a deeper and even more complex kind of discrimination against individuals with darker shades of skin even within their own racial group. A subplot involves Quinn's difficulty

coping with her grandmother's diagnosis of Alzheimer's, and Quinn ultimately finds strength and courage through her relationship with her grandmother. Quinn grows as she navigates both old and new friendships, communicates with her parents, faces her fears, speaks up, and learns to trust herself and others, including Carter whose friendship grows into romance. Teen readers will cheer them on and relate to their discoveries as graduation draws nearer, and the to-do lists are completed.

Students who enjoy the challenge of meeting a deadline while also wanting to think more about coming of age with peer pressure exacerbated by social media will find Couch and Goffney's novels to be refreshing. And, while time may slip away while reading them, readers will be reminded that the only deadlines that matter are the ones we create for ourselves.

Author Biography

Kristin Bartley Lenz, LMSW, is the author of the young adult novel, *The Art of Holding On and Letting Go*, which was a Junior Library Guild Selection and a Great Lakes Great Books Award honor book. She teaches creative writing workshops for teens and adults and writes freelance for Detroit area nonprofits. She can be reached at kristinbartleylenz@gmail.com or through her website at www.kristinbartleylenz.com.

