

Daphne Palasi Andreades's debut novel is a love letter to a home left behind

By: Samantha Sollitto

This is not a story about a fictional character who goes off on amazing adventures; Nor is it about a historical figure whose life we have the privilege of reliving through the pages of a way-too-long novel.

This is a story about brown girls. Girls who grew up in the dregs of Queens originally hoping that they would get to leave someday. That they would become successful and never have to look back.

For a novel that originally started out as a short story that was a fraction of the length, "Brown Girls" by Daphne Palasi Andreades certainly knows how to leave the reader wanting more, even if its final page count is 203.

The novel, published on January 4 of this year and separated into eight parts, is a retelling of her and her peers' lives as brown girls growing up in Queens, following them as they move through each phase of life.

Now, this idea for a plot may seem a bit boring. Who would want to follow a bunch of girls around through their lives if there's no action to keep the reader hooked?

But Andreades doesn't disappoint. In fact, some of the more interesting parts of the novel come from the way it's styled more than the content itself.

The book is written in a very poetic tone. Many of the chapters are kept short, containing only one to two pages.

She also uses a lot of repetition throughout the novel, which really helps emphasize certain points for the reader. In the chapter, "Brown," the word "color" is repeated at the beginning of every sentence as she compares the color of their skin to everyday objects. Had she chosen to not use this, it would have completely taken away from the punch in the face the reader receives when they realize the point she's trying to make: everyone is different.

And yet, besides all of this, the most interesting part of the novel comes in the form of one tiny two letter word that happens to be a part of our everyday vernacular: "we."

The entire novel is told from the first person plural point of view, so the reader is never meeting just one character. Instead we meet groups of people. We meet Khadija, Maribeth, Ximena. We meet Cindy, Kyra, Annabel and Esther.

It seems that Andreades main goal for the novel was to bring together a group of people through a collective of shared experiences that their community has faced. She speaks throughout the book

describing vague and specific situations all while saying “we did this” or “we did that” and, by some miracle, she actually makes it work.

Andreades made it really simple to follow along in this format. She included specific groups of names in certain chapters like “Musical Chairs” or “Art,” which allowed the reader to put some names to the actions she was describing.

However, in “Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,” Andreades’ magical “we” finally betrays her and ultimately becomes confusing. In this specific chapter, she travels between two altering points of views: those who stayed in Queens after they graduated and those who left.

Starting off the chapter with those who left, she describes how they feel the people from their hometown are judgemental of their success. But then, halfway through, she switches to the other side of the story, describing the way that those who stayed feel abandoned.

An impactful chapter for sure, but without any clear indication as to who’s speaking other than the word “we,” it takes a few reads to fully understand how we got from one point to the next.

The “we” also takes a short break when it comes to chapters like “Trish,” a welcome insertion of a recurring character.

Trish’s specific chapters help bring a personal aspect to the novel. Trish, although used as an actual woman who died, can also be seen as a representation of the lives they left behind in Queens. Her death brought them back together for a while, but it’s only a matter of time before they returned to the lives they now considered their home.

After Trish though, the reader is given the insight that maybe these girls don’t despise Queens as much as they once did.

In “Brown Girls,” Andreades depicts a related sentiment to those discussed in books such as “The Song of Achilles” by Madeline Miller. After the girls have gotten out and become successful, they realize that Queens isn’t as bad as they thought it was. “Song of Achilles” shares a similar plot where Patroclus learns to love his new home after resenting it at first because of his own personal upbringing.

This sentiment in “Brown Girls” truly shines in part six when the girls return to Queens, reminiscing on their past lives there. They condemn the new construction happening, replacing the once colorful and homely neighborhood with the modernized plague of high tech companies and name brand logos. But had these girls been their 12 year old selves again, would they have really cared what happened to Queens?

In addition to this growth the girls experience, the entire novel is rooted in the idea of womanhood. When these girls grew up and became adults, they were expected to find a man, get married, have children. Yet, some women don't want any of this in life.

Andreades represents this well in part seven when she discusses childbirth. It's a scary process that some women don't want to go through. But rather than accept her decision to do what she pleases with her body, there will always be people condemning her for her choices. It's the same with abortion, which Andreades touches on for a few lines. While some people are supportive of a women's right to choose, others - including our government - are not.

"Brown Girls" is a stunning depiction of feeling as though you don't belong somewhere because of your gender, your sexuality, or the color of your skin and the profound realization that you belong everywhere you wish to belong. Andreades creates a lengthy love letter to the life that she - and many others - once lived in the dregs of Queens.

And while it may have taken her a little while to realize, "Brown Girls" quickly helps the reader understand what home truly is with a beautiful rejection of what we once thought home was defined as: "Why did we ever believe home could only be one place? When existing in these bodies means holding many worlds within us."