

Rapunzella, or, Don't Touch My Hair

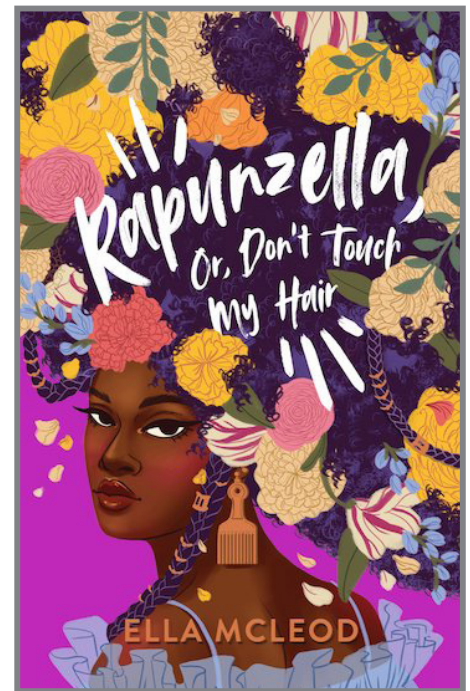
AUTHOR

ELLA MCLEOD

SCIS: 5409884

ISBN: 9780702313868

RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary



SYNOPSIS

You're fifteen, you spend your time at school and at Val's hair salon with Baker, Val's son, who has eyes that are like falling off a cliff into space. The salon is a space of safety, but also of possibility and dreams . . . Dreams of hair so rich and alive that it grow upwards and outwards into a wild landscape, becomes trees and leaves, and houses birds and butterflies and all the secret creatures that belong in such a forest.

Is there a future where such possibility and power is more than just a dream?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella McLeod is a writer, poet, performer and graduate of Warwick University. She has worked as a spoken word poet and actress and as an Assistant Producer for *Somethin' Else*. Ella also created and narrated *Celina and the Spider*, a series of three family-friendly storytime sessions with HOME Manchester. *Rapunzella, or, Don't Touch My Hair*, is her debut novel.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
 - What does the picture on the cover show?
 - What does the title tell us about what might happen in this story?
 - What do you think the subtitle is letting us know about the contents of the book?
 - Which fairytale character does 'Rapunzella' sound like? What was the fairytale character's story, and do you think this is likely to be relevant to the novel?
 - Who do you think might be the main character of the novel?
 - What do you predict might occur during the story? What are you basing this prediction on?
- What is the origin of the songs sung in the story? In small groups or pairs, choose one of the songs mentioned in the book, and research its history and meaning. Create an electronic 'paedia' entry for your song, incorporating sound files, images, and text. Share your entry with the class.
- As a class, learn to sing the songs mentioned in the story. Perform them at a school assembly or for another class.
- Val says that her homeland where Baker was born is Almost-Jamaica, just the other side of the clouds. How does the history of Jamaica tie into the history of Persea as told in the book? In small groups, or as a class, briefly investigate the history of Jamaica through colonial times up to the present, and then in pairs or small groups compare the stated history of Persea within the novel to the known history of Jamaica.

- Unusually for a novel, the story is almost (but not quite) exclusively narrated in the second person. Write a brief piece outlining, identifying and discussing the effect on the reader of a second-person narrative. Include in your discussion your hypotheses as to why the author has chosen to present the story predominantly using second-person, and the direct impact of this choice on the reader's understanding of events and the extent to which they identify with the protagonist.
- Why do you think that the author does not tell us the main character's name until the very end of the book?
- Saffy gets into a fight when another girl says she can't be a mermaid in their production, because she isn't white. While at the time she stands up for her rights, and argues that she should be allowed to be a mermaid, later she says sadly to her family that all the stories have white mermaids. As a class, discuss the importance of representation within mainstream literature and media for marginalised and minority groups, most specifically for children.
- Zella says we are better when we are united. Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not? Is this potentially a universal truism, or can you think of instances where it is very much incorrect?
- At three separate points in the story three different characters (Kam p 80, Ama p 99, and Val p 109) state that 'The winds are changing'. Analyse this metaphor within the context of the novel as a whole. Consider all the different ways that this could be interpreted, and what you see it as portending to within the context of the story overall.
- When did you start to suspect that Baker was the Weaver's son? What were the first hints? (Think of things that you might have missed when you read them that came clear only in retrospect.) In the context of Val and the story, what is a Weaver?
- On p 147, Mrs Cobain introduces her English class to the Shakespearean idea that 'All the world's a stage', and the protagonist thinks of all the millions of plays being acted out around you. In pairs or small groups choose a busy public space near where you live and with which you are familiar. Spend five minutes observing the people who pass through or use this space, and write an imaginative play featuring some of them as characters. Do not use anyone who you actually know as a fictional character, and be sure to set your play predominantly within your chosen place.
- The author describes vending machines as 'silent sugary sentinels'. (p 149) Create illustrative descriptions of at least three different everyday objects that emphasise a specific aspect of them and their existence.
- The willow trees lining the river are described as having evergreen heavens (p 190). What do you imagine an evergreen heaven that is associated with willows might look like? Create an artwork inspired by this phrase specifically, and the novel in general.
- How do you think Baker feels when people are wary of him based purely on his appearance?
- As a class, discuss the link between discrimination, stereotyping, racial profiling and inequity as highlighted by the experiences of both Baker and Sojourner.
- Compare and contrast the way in which Sojourner chooses to straighten her hair, with the rampant and magically powerful natural growth of Zella's hair. Consider in your discussion the roles of colonialism and racism within the practice of hair straightening. Specifically address the question of why someone from a minority group might choose to change an aspect of their appearance to one that is common among the majority.
- Re-read the description of the cottage on p 191. Using this description, paint or draw a picture of the cottage and its environs that you feel captures the essence of Kam and Zella's home.
- As a class, discuss the differences in how Monica and Cat treat someone who they both call a friend. What makes a true friend? What makes someone not a friend?
- On p 195 Zella is described as a large, bright bird of paradise, generous wingspan and enormous feathers. While Kam in contrast is a prowling jungle cat, a panther or jaguar. Describe yourself, or a friend or family member, in terms of a jungle animal. Think carefully about which aspects of both appearance and behaviour are highlighted by the comparison, and write a brief explanation of the reasoning behind your specific choice of animal.
- On p 209, Sojourner directly addresses Monica's complaints that everything is about racism these days. She states that "It's always been about racism, actually, Monica." . . . "It's about power and who has it. It's about health and life and powerful people choosing whose life gets to matter." As a class, discuss this statement, considering the history of racism within your own community as well as on a broader scale. Some things you might wish to include in your discussion could be:

- To what extent can systemic racism be seen as being motivated by power?
- What are some of the other societal factors that contribute to racism?
- How does systemic racism differ from racist behaviour or attitudes in an individual?
- What impact do statements such as Monica's have on the overall societal narrative surrounding racism if they are left unaddressed?
- Why is it important that people understand the origin and systemic nature of racism and racist policies rather than just simply condemning it?
- What can we, as individuals, do to help progress the decrease of racism within our society?
- How and why do racism and privilege overlap?
- On p 218, Sojourner realises how profoundly the familiar neighbourhood has changed since she and Baker were small. How much has your local area changed in your lifetime, and in what way? Is it an area where there has been recent rapid change or is it more stable? In small groups, discuss all the recent and slightly less recent changes that you can remember occurring in your local area. Research what changes have happened this century, and try to locate imagery and stories from before you were born sharing how things used to look.
- Read the authors note, and as a class discuss what it brings to your understanding of the novel as a whole.
- After washing your hair, try using a small amount of avocado oil as a conditioning treatment. How well does it work for you, and does it match the description of avocado oil from the story?