

## Ghost Boys

A review by Alice

Ghost Boys is an incredibly powerful and contemporary book by Jewell Parker Rhodes that covers important themes such as racial injustice, violence, and police brutality and explores how people's biases can lead to destruction – in this case fatal destruction.

It tells the achingly unfair tale of Jerome, a 12-year-old black boy from Chicago whose toy gun is mistaken for a real gun, and he is shot dead by a Police Officer without warning.

The white officer is quoted in The Chicago Tribune as saying, "I had no choice!" and "He had a gun," but as a reader we feel this statement can't be true. Whilst reading I felt frustrated and angry - Jerome has his life cruelly stolen from him at the hands of injustice. This was heightened when I later learnt the officer was not charged with any crime.

The story has an interesting dual narrative that flits between the events leading up to the moment of Jerome's death and his time as a ghost. This gives us a clearer picture of who Jerome is, his life, family and struggles at school.

We learn that Jerome was constantly hiding from bullies at school, desperate to stay out of trouble and go unnoticed. This insight into Jerome's character makes the story even more poignant as we become familiar with his gentle and unassuming nature.

We also learn that Jerome is not alone in the afterlife and his story is sadly far from unique. He meets 'hundreds and thousands' of other 'ghost boys' – black boys just like him who have met similar and unfair fates.

One is the ghost of Emmett Till, a real-life character from Michigan who was brutally murdered by a gang of white men in 1950s America. Emmett's story serves as proof that the issue of systemic racism has been ever-present in our society for over 65 years. Emmett helps Jerome realise the tragic stories of other people of colour throughout history and how they have suffered through slavery and violence.

He also provides Jerome with hope. Emmett tells him he is a ghost for a reason, that he has something important to do and can help things change. He says, "Only the living can make a change."

Each ghost boy can talk to a living person who can help them. For Jerome, it is Sarah, the daughter of the officer who shot him. He tells Sarah about the events of his death, and she realises that her father has done something terrible and then becomes an activist against racism – a fighter for social justice.

Through Sarah, Jerome and the other ghost boys can find some peace and move on from the world.

I think this is uplifting and the author is telling us that even though racism is very much alive in society today hope is not lost. The overarching theme of the book is learning. It makes us

question why after over half a century; little has changed in society, but also tells us we all can make a difference.

What I loved about this book is that the story is engaging, fast and moving. I also think that Jewell Parker Rhodes was able to voice the forgotten lives of the anonymous ghost boys who died unjustly and increase our understanding of racism. She says in the book's After Word, 'I do believe that as a living person, I am obliged to honour and speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves.' - a powerful quote that embodies all that the book achieves in just 198 gripping pages.

The book furthered my understanding of how deeply rooted racial prejudice remains in society today and the emotional and compelling story stayed with me long after I finished the book.

Rhodes has a clear message for us all through Jerome when she says, 'Only the living can make the world a better place. Live and make it better.' The hopeful message I took away from the book is that all of us in some way, no matter how big or small the act, can help to make the world a better place.