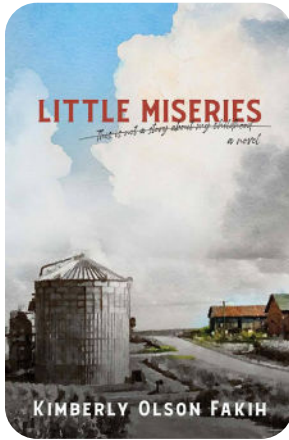


A WISE book discussion

Little Miseries: This is Not A Story of My Childhood by Kimberly Olson Fakh



Little Miseries: This is Not A Story of My Childhood, by Kimberly Olson Fakh, explores the bewilderment and pain of growing up and realizing that adults do not always have all the answers and cannot always keep kids safe. While the book adeptly carries us back to the time of bouffant hairdos and car cigarette lighters to witness the little - and big - miseries of the three Castle children, we are curious how times have changed, how we have evolved to understand these issues better, and where we still leave kids unprotected.

Kim has her heart set on a dress that her mother gets her for Christmas, but in the wrong color. Her mother is trying to tell Kim something that she knows about women's experience - that women are punished for being considered fat - but she ends up communicating something else: "She wants me to know what she knows. But by telling me these things, she is taking the side of all the people who have called me names. I'm supposed to understand them. Instead of saying they are cruel, or wrong, or even just stupid, she's saying this: They have a point." (p. 24) **How do we navigate trying to prepare children for life's injustices without perpetuating them?**

Early in the book we come to understand that Nellie is being sexually abused. Throughout the story, there are examples where family members choose to not see what they do not want to confront. The favorite grandmother Grandma Jenkins says, "...he promised me it would never happen again, and I believed him." (p. 43) **What is the danger to a family if they fully acknowledge the violence that is happening within it? What is the danger of not acknowledging it?**

Kim is often compared to her brother unfavorably for having similar attributes: "Kimmy's bossy. Paul is the leader." (p. 79) and "Kim gets the A's but Paul is the one with common sense." (p. 141) **Why is it so easy for parents to fall into the traps of gender stereotypes with their own children? What gender stereotypes have you noticed informing children in your lives and how do you talk about it?**

Kim observes: "The...women have such deep lines around their mouths - and once I thought it was from smoking. Now I know that it's from pursing their lips closed whenever one of their husbands, sons, uncles, nephews, grandfathers, insert-male-relative-here, starts spouting off about anything." (p. 195) **What does it do to relationships when there is an expectation to keep your lips closed? What are the consequences if women refuse to keep silent in their relationships? Has this expectation changed or evolved?**

Kim wonders: "It's a strange thought, that adults want to escape any part of their lives. They are the ones who have set them up, after all. Why is there anything to escape?" (p. 203) As an adult, sometimes our lives can feel more like they happened to us than that we chose them. **What are the forces in our culture that shape our lives without our intention or permission? What have you changed intentionally in your own life?**

After spending so much time collecting stories and observations, Kim reflects: "I probably need to talk to my parents, or to someone, about all the missing girls. The missing children. Who, like Nellie, can be right under our noses, but living through experiences we cannot fathom." (p. 219) **What do you imagine those conversations could have done for Kim? What opportunities for conversation and information are available now that were missing when you were young?**

Would you like a WISE educator to help facilitate a conversation with your book group?
Please contact Kate at 603-448-5922 ext. 111 and we can explore these and other thoughts together.