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The Third Rainbow Girl's Exterior

Expressing intent early and plainly can drastically improve how a written work is perceived. That's why essays — like this one — have thesis statements; they let the reader know the author's purpose and view on the topic. In a broader sense, pieces of prerequisite information (article headlines, synopses of fictional works, tables of contents, etc.) have a huge impact on the whole. Fortunately, many written mediums have methods of expressing this innate information. Yet unfortunately, many written works are capable of accidentally misusing or even intentionally abusing these methods. Imagine if a cookbook advertised itself as having vegan recipes, but then included fringe animal products, like honey and gelatine. When speaking about books, which are notably retail products, "genre" is often subjective. The author might describe the book's genre differently from the reader. What might cause this? Perhaps readers interpret the appeal or mood in ways that were unintended by the author. Perhaps people have different definitions of genres. Perhaps the author sees genre as nothing more than a marketing strategy. This is particularly tricky when dealing with *multiple* genres, as with what appears to be the case in Emma Copley Eisenberg's *The Third Rainbow Girl*, a book harboring a questionable relationship with its own setting, which I believe many people went into reading for the wrong reasons.

If you stumbled upon *The Third Rainbow Girl* in a bookstore, what might be your first impression of it? Maybe you might think, "on its face, Emma Copley Eisenberg's new book … is a true crime read about the 1980 murders of [Vicki Durian and Nancy Santomero]," like Eric Douglas described in his article, 'Rainbow Girl Murders Book Stirs Modern Controversy' (Douglas). At first glance, I'd agree. The book was titled after a real-life event involving the

murder of two women; the cover touts “the long life of a double murder in Appalachia;” even the photography — which depicts a rural dirt road winding through a forest lit only by the sky — feels like a true crime cliché to me. However, what the first chapter begins to reveal is that this book delves into territory akin to political thought pieces, reading more as an auto-biography of Emma Copley Eisenberg. It’s a memoir. In Douglas’ article, Doug Van Gundy agrees by stating, “despite the subject and the setting, this is not, at its heart, a book about West Virginia, or Pocahontas County, or the difference between truth and perception, or even the murders of Vicki Durian and Nancy Santomero. It is about Emma Copley Eisenberg, and her occasionally painful, often self-destructive quest to understand herself.” Van Gundy offers a local perspective as a writer from West Virginia, struggling to see the true crime aspect of the story as the heart of the book, as the title suggests.

That’s not to say I’m uninterested in the book. Quite the opposite, in fact. From the amount that I’ve read, I’m optimistic in Eisenberg’s ability to tie the event of Vicki and Nancy’s death together with her own story in a contemporary fashion. As a queer person and feminist, many of the topics explored in this book are important to me — the effects that an upbringing can have on perspective, gendered violence as an ongoing issue, and embracing modern masculinity. Eisenberg recognizes her privilege and acknowledges her differing perspectives within the text, mentioning, “I knew the very position of dissenting and dismay was a privileged one and that my rejection of these choices made, to rational people and people with less class and race privilege, very little sense,” (Eisenberg 58) and there is nothing inherently wrong with a real-world event inspiring introspective writing, but that doesn’t necessarily excuse misleading potential readers. While I trust that the book’s intent is good-natured and the book’s execution of that intent is largely unharmful, I still believe the book’s *exterior* is potentially irresponsible.

Advertising as primarily “true crime” is an oversight at best or a morally-shaky opportunity at worst. I believe there wouldn’t even be this discussion surrounding *The Third Rainbow Girl* if it wasn’t called *The Third Rainbow Girl*. By removing the possibility that this book is capitalizing on a real, tragic event by marketing it as a memoir, you remove a lot of the uncertainty regarding the author’s true intentions.

Something that remains difficult for me to ignore is how Eisenberg mentioned in her interview with Eric Douglas that the self-reflection aspect of her book was an afterthought, explaining, “at first I didn’t. At first this was a book solely about the rainbow murders. But I felt that, because I’m not from the area … my story is not one of being raised in the county and growing up with these murders as my reality … it felt important to acknowledge where I was from and what my position in encountering the community in Pocahontas County was.” I am glad that she acknowledged her privilege and position as an outsider within the pages — because that feels necessary when writing about society’s reactions to real events, especially when those events involve gendered violence — but it concerns me that this wasn’t simply given.

There is evidence that seems to heavily support the possibility that this entire controversy stems from ignorance on the author’s part. In an interview, Eisenberg claims, “I'm not sure I even knew the phrase ‘true crime’ when I started writing in 2013,” and, “I think it was probably in the first sales meeting that it became a book under the label ‘true crime’” (Carroll). With that said, I’m inclined to believe that Eisenberg wasn’t entirely responsible for the marketing of her book and that there was no conscious malicious intent involved in its release. The intent and the execution are important factors in how a work is perceived, but so is the premise. Eisenberg demonstrates exemplary understanding of her topic, but the initial premise of her book and the way it was marketed is more than questionable.

Works Cited

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