Southwest Licking School District

Literature Selection Review

Teacher: Paula Ball
School: Watkins Memorial High School

Book Title: A Raisin in the Sun
Genre: Drama

Author: Lorraine Hansberry
Publisher: Mass market paperback

Book Summary and summary citation:

From the publisher:

In this powerful, prize-winning play, a Black family desperately struggles to maintain its dignity, self-respect and humanity.

Instructional Rationale/Objectives:

Analyze how characters develop and advance plot or theme
Read and comprehend literature at grade level

Review one:

Sacred Fire

A Raisin in the Sun, written by the then twenty-nine-year-old Hansberry, was the "movin on up" morality play of the 1960s. Martin had mesmerized millions, and integration was seen as the stairway to heaven. Raisin had something for everyone, and for this reason it was the recipient of the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

The place: a tenement flat in Southside, Chicago. The time: post World War II. Lena Younger, the strong-willed matriarch, is the glue that holds together the Younger family. Walter Lee is her married, thirty-something son who, along with his wife and sister, lives in his mother s apartment. He is short on meeting responsibilities but long on dreams. Beneatha (that s right, Beneatha) is Waiter s sister an upwardly mobile college student who plans to attend medical school.

Mama Lena is due a check from her late husband s insurance, and Waiter Lee is ready to invest it in a liquor store. The money represents his opportunity to assert his manhood. It will bring the jump start he needs to set his life right. Beneatha tells him that it s "mama s money to do with as
she pleases," and that she doesn’t really expect any for her schooling. However, Mama wants to use her new money for a new beginning in a new house, in a new neighborhood (white).

Walter cries, and Mama relents. She refrains from paying cash for the house and places a deposit instead, giving Waiter the difference to share equally between his investment and Beneatha’s college fund. Walter squanders the entire amount. Meanwhile, Mama receives a call from the neighborhood "welcome committee" hoping to dissuade the family from moving in.

While roundly criticized for being politically accommodating to whites, Raisin accurately reflected the aspirations of a newly nascent black middle class.

**Review Two:**

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Library Journal

Hansberry's (1930-65) landmark play tells the story of the Youngers, an African American family living in a run-down apartment in Chicago, who are about to inherit $10,000 from an insurance policy following the death of the family patriarch. As their dreams clash, the family's hopes for a better life threaten to dry up like "a raisin in the sun." Over 50 years after the play debuted, its words continue to resonate as unemployment, inflation, identity theft, and corrupt mortgage brokers have shattered the dreams of many. In this production starring Rutina Wesley of HBO's True Blood and a full cast, the individual performances—e.g., that by Judyann Elder, who plays Lena (Mama)—are exceptional, but the dynamic of the cast as a whole is lacking. Lines are sometimes shouted and overacted, as if the actors are more concerned with voice projection than the content and context of their roles. Overall, a decent production of a groundbreaking play but with room for improvement. An alternate full-cast recording of this play, starring Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, is available from Recorded Books. [See Audio NewsBriefs, LJ 2/1/11.—Ed.]—Valerie Piechocki, Prince George's Cty. Memorial Lib., Largo, MD

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings Maya Angelou

Document any potentially controversial content:

The use of the word, damn, a few times in the play, one character considers an abortion but does not have one, one character drinks alcohol, and realistic portrayal of discrimination

GRADE LEVEL(S): 9 and 10

Reading level of this title (if applicable): 9/10

Date Submitted to website: August 1, 2011

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)
Library Journal
Book Links
Publisher’s Weekly
Booklist
Kirkus Review
Wilson Library Catalog
English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)
The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)
Literature for Today’s Young Adults