



The Language Inside

Holly Thompson

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A nuanced novel in verse that explores identity in a multicultural world.

Emma Karas was raised in Japan; it's the country she calls home. But when her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer, Emma's family moves to a town outside Lowell, Massachusetts, to stay with Emma's grandmother while her mom undergoes treatment.

Emma feels out of place in the United States. She begins to have migraines, and longs to be back in Japan. At her grandmother's urging, she volunteers in a long-term care center to help Zena, a patient with locked-in syndrome, write down her poems. There, Emma meets Samnang, another volunteer, who assists elderly Cambodian refugees. Weekly visits to the care center, Zena's poems, dance, and noodle soup bring Emma and Samnang closer, until Emma must make a painful choice: stay in Massachusetts, or return home early to Japan.

The Language Inside Details

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Author : Holly Thompson

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From Reader Review The Language Inside for online ebook

Avery Udagawa says

I highly recommend this book for cross-cultural teens. Emma Karas grew up in Japan but moves to Massachusetts when her mother develops breast cancer. Feeling lost in her “native” US, Emma develops migraines and longs to help friends in Japan who survived the March 2011 tsunami. Life changes when she meets a boy who studies Cambodian dance, who introduces his own community’s devastating history. Emma processes loss and healing in poems that she writes with Zena, a feisty woman living with locked-in syndrome at a long-term care center.

The Language Inside pulls together many places and themes: Japan, America, Cambodia, breast cancer, locked-in syndrome, migraines, earthquake/tsunami, genocide, dance, poetry. A reviewer for Publishers Weekly comments that the many strands can “seem like too much”—which is exactly how a multicultural life can feel. But the reviewer goes on to say that the strands are masterfully woven, creating a “seamless” fictional world. As both reader and parent, I see this accomplishment as a wonderful source of hope.

caitlyn.yeu says

book i needed to read for school

Saisha says

"I'm from Japan, is all,"
"yeah, sure, white girl,"

The author deceives the readers with a seemingly relatable TCK. A story with a message of hope supported with a wide variety of poetic devices. Yet, somehow Holly Thomson fails miserably at hooking any reader's attention in her book "The Language Inside".

The overused tropes of a teenage romance and a loved one facing cancer fail to keep the reader engaged whatsoever, and have not opened my eyes to valuable life lessons. Thomson tries desperately to hook the reader by incorporating Japanese and Cambodian culture to TRY to teach us SOMETHING and only manages to crash and burn. In addition to this, she bores us even more by extending the same overused theme of an identity crisis, in other words, unnecessary use of 500 pages to describe one feeling. In conclusion, the book waned along with my interest despite a hopeful beginning.

Jessica says

This is honestly unlike anything I've ever read before. Wow. This book is written in verse, which I'm pretty sure the last time I read a book in verse was in elementary school, so I was really hesitant going in. In the

end, I enjoyed it so much more than I ever thought I could.

Emma has lived in Japan her entire life, so when her family has to move back to America because her mom has breast cancer, Emma is devastated. But her mother needs them, so she holds her head high and does the best she can. The worst part about leaving is not only that they miss their friends and an entirely different culture, but some of their friends were devastated by the tsunami that just hit Japan, destroying entire lives, so Emma feels like she's deserting her country at its greatest time of need. To keep herself busy, Emma volunteers at a care center to help a woman with locked-in syndrome write poetry, and that's where she meets Samnang, another volunteer helping out two older Cambodian men. Emma starts to really care about her life in America, so if the time came, would she choose to go back to Japan?

Wow, this book is just so complex for being a book written in verse. I'm not sure how I thought it would turn out, but the language was so powerful and beautiful and really easy to follow along. Emma has to deal with such heavy stuff, from her mom's cancer and Zena's locked-in syndrome to Samnang's patients who are survivors of the Cambodian genocide. Add on top of that the fact that she had to leave behind a country she loves so much for America, which has such a different way of life than Japan. Identity is a huge issue in her life and you just want Emma to be okay in the end and comfortable in her own skin.

The emotions in this book were amazing too. I felt like I was actually inside Emma's head, listening to how she felt about everything in such a fluid, beautiful way. This was a really quick read as well. While it's over 500 pages, I finished this in one day because it was so fast paced and the story was just too good to stop reading.

To read this book, you definitely have to be open minded about reading a novel in verse and prepared for an emotional, serious story. Once you start it, though, you'll be pulled into to a whirlwind of emotions and you won't want to put it down.

Kiana says

“I know how to read the silence in Japan
I can read the air in Japan
but I don't have a clue
how to read the air here”

Written by Holly Thompson, *The Language Inside* was published in 2013 by the Delacorte Press in New York. The targeted audience for this book is young teens to young adults. My favorite character in this book would be Zena who is a woman that the main character, Emma meets. Zena is not able to laugh however she does have a little language with Emma. I do not recommend this book because it was very difficult to read and understand. The whole book was written in poetry form and it was extremely hard to follow along with. So unless you like challenging books to read, I do not recommend this.

Lorelei Resnick says

"I'm from Japan, is all,"
"yeah, sure, white girl,"

The author deceives the readers with a seemingly relatable TCK. A story with a message of hope supported with a wide variety of poetic devices. Yet, somehow Holly Thomson fails miserably at hooking any reader's attention in her book "The Language Inside".

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Sara - thelookingglassreads says

The Language Inside is a meaningful contemporary novel in verse. I wasn't blown away by it, but Emma's narrative resembled stream-of-consciousness style, and I liked that. This story about a Japanese girl who moves to Massachusetts for her mother's cancer treatment is one of love and newfound understanding.

Emma is pretty depressed and homesick at the beginning of the story. She is worried for her mother, restless that she can't help her friends in Japan recover from the earthquake, and she misses all of the little things about her home.

I felt like I could connect a lot with Emma's character. The narrative quality was amazing, I must say. However, the novel was in verse, and I found that a lot more could be said than was. It did have a minimalist quality that I didn't really like or not like. Novels in verse usually aren't my thing, but I'm happy that I tried out The Language Inside. It was a pleasant surprise and I liked it more than I usually like verse novels.

There is a lot of focus on family and resilience in tough times in The Language Inside. Emma's family is dealing with her dad being gone for huge amounts of time for work and also her mom battling breast cancer. I felt like Emma as a character could have been more developed, but I admired her resilience through her family's hard times.

Of course, there is a boy too. I really liked Samnang. He is a dancer and is really fascinated and loves his Cambodian culture. He and Emma bond over the diversities of Japanese and Cambodian culture and they are amazing together. They both volunteer at a sort of assisted living center, which is how they meet. Emma works with a woman named Vera, who has locked-in syndrome. I loved Vera! Even though she was limited in ways of expressing herself, she was so expressive and I loved every scene with her in it!

Overall, The Language Inside was a worthwhile read. I liked the focus it had on never losing where you come from and family. There was so much rich culture references and dancing and Samnang!

Nidah (SleepDreamWrite) says

This was okay. Some of the characters were okay too. Writing was good.

Emily says

“I know how to read silence in Japan
I can read the air in Japan
But I don’t have a clue
How to read the air here”

Written by Holly Thompson, the language inside was first published in 2013. it is young adult, and about social issues; this book brings out the ups and downs about change, and how a person can adapt to it.

Teenager Emma Karas has lived in Japan for her whole life and even though she is American, on the inside she feels Japanese. When her mom gets cancer, they are forced to move to Massachusetts, where some of her family is. However, because of the stress, she starts to get constant migraines and misses her home. She volunteers and helps Zena at a care center, and they express their feelings through poems. She also becomes friends with Samnang, another volunteer. These all add up and change Emma’s perspective of America. At the end, Emma is hit with a heartbreak choice to either go back to Japan, or stay in Massachusetts.

The language inside is a beautiful written book, with lots of emotion and issues the main character has to deal with. The book is written in poems, which makes it have even stronger meaning and makes a smooth read. I love how the book is realistic, and shows how hard change can be. This book is excellent for anyone who is going through change; it will remind them change can be good, and that everyone goes through it.

Alexis says

Don't get me wrong, this book had some interesting things to say about multiculturalism and the culture shock and process of acclimation that comes with moving to a new place, but I didn't feel that it was really well developed. Out of all the various themes in the book (cancer, moving, getting used to new lifestyles) I thought the most interesting one was the romantic sub-plot, when I think says a lot coming from someone who has lost enough loved ones to cancer, has moved a lot (and understand adjusting to knew places), and loves learning about various societies.

At the ending I didn't feel happy, or sad, or relieved, or feel any other real emotion.

I want to blame my lack of love for this book on the poetry, but alas I actually think the poetry was decent; only the story-telling seemed dull.

Oh well. I'm sure it will appeal to different people.

Sesana says

Nicely written, and Emma is an unusually believable "sweet" character. She does the noble, self effacing thing, but in a way that felt realistic. I've known girls an awful lot like her. This book's one failing is that it presents an awful lot of issues, but doesn't actually do much with them. They're largely just there, something to add color and depth to the book, but aren't dealt with in any real way. The love interest is the son of a Cambodian refugee, and though it's a given that his mother's life experiences have shaped both of their lives, it isn't really explored meaningfully. And the sheer volume of issues means that the things that are meant to be important, like the mother's cancer diagnosis, are pushed off to the side for an unusually long time.

Jonathan Peto says

This book is written in verse. Thumbing through it, you might think there's a poem per page. It looks that way because many pages are not "full". The arrangement of the lines are certainly intentional and are often used to good effect, but I wasn't always sure about the page breaks, though I had no specific complaints. I chose the book because I wanted to get through some fiction this weekend and it looked short, which it was, but I may have moved too fast to give all of it, such as the page breaks, my best.

Even though the words on the page don't necessarily appear to flow together, they do. They depict a character's stream-of-consciousness. That isn't so bad, because the verse isn't clumsy artifice; it works seamlessly once you get going. I didn't even notice at first that it's written in present tense. Dialogue, portrayed with italics, was also easy to get used to.

The viewpoint character is a teenage girl named Emma Karas. Raised in Japan, Emma recently returned with her family to Massachusetts, temporarily (six months, maybe a year), because her mother requires treatment for breast cancer. Things happen, sometimes in flashback as she reflects on it, but mainly in the moment. The moment consists of brief episodes at the American high school she attends, visits to a stroke victim named Zena, and interactions with family members and others, including a Cambodian guy (Samnang) who also volunteers at the Newall Center for Long Term Care and shares Emma's interest in dance.

Your enjoyment of the novel may depend almost entirely on your enjoyment of Emma. She's earnest, probably because of her mother's cancer and what happened a short time before they left for the US: the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The book itself is earnest: there are issues galore, such as cancer, the effects of the tsunami on the Tohoku region of Japan, the effects of Pol Pot's regime on Cambodian refugees who reside in Massachusetts, the care and isolation of incapacitated members of our communities, the meaning of identity, and the power of words, poetry in particular, because Emma writes poetry with Zena.

I liked Emma. Despite the earnestness, she's sometimes funny and cute, like when she bows, a habit from Japan. Thompson captures quite a few memorable and very real moments. They often hinge on emotions, including fear and nervousness, embarrassment and uncertainty. Given the amount of time we spend in Emma's head, I think it would have been more realistic if her thoughts about Samnang were sometimes a little more raw and curious, but it was just not that kind of novel. Only a little bit.

Sps says

Improbably likeable and satisfying. Possibly 3.5 stars. This book is the runt (despite its hefty size), the underdog, the dark horse, the long shot for making me like it because I do not care for books that layer on the themes like a Dagwood sandwich. And *The Language Inside* does just that: Japan, belonging, duty, poetry, the 2011 earthquake/tsunami, moving and adjusting to living with grandparents, family member with cancer, Japanese folk dance, Cambodian folk dance, Cambodian bloody history, teen alcoholism, migraines, first love...I'm probably forgetting a few. It's an issues book inside an issues book inside an issues book. But somehow it works; it's clever but it's grounded; it's got lovely language and it feels friendly.

For some reason the verse works for me, because her point of view is fractured, emotional, interior, and the narrator is indeed a poet. So it doesn't feel like a gimmick. In places like p. 173 (of the ARC) where Emma feels the onset of a migraine, it even feels like a wonderful union of visual, text, subject, and style:

at first I think it's just the irregular line breaks
the space the poet made tween words
but I look up
at the sh lves
at t librarian
and the spot fo lows

grows

The free verse form, and Emma's interest in poetry, allows the text to use poetic imagery in a way that would be seem out of place in conventional teen prose, e.g. "when a plastic bag/turned into a jellyfish/we scrambled out, showered/then walked to the end of the beach" (71-ARC).

The integration of Japanese words worked smoothly and felt like a way of knowing Emma better. Her Japanese best friend tells her "*but inside you're Japanese.../using the word nakami--filling/for inside*" (73)

This read middle-school to me, from the cover shot to the content, though it's marketed as teen. My guess is that it will end up on our juvenile shelves and I'll happily give it to sixth graders and above.

Other notes: I'm calling it historical fiction because it's very much set in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Japan.

Ali Michalek says

I really liked this one - I'm not always a fan of poetry styled books like this one but it was tough to put down.

A girl and her family moving from Japan to America for her mother and learning to cope with what's going on around her. Reading the poetry within the verse was pretty interesting but very easy to get.

Nafiza says

I'm a fan of Thompson's Orchards so I was gleeful when I got a copy of her latest verse novel at the ALA conference. Unfortunately, The Language Inside just did not do it for me the way I hoped it would.

There are many reasons for that but first I must give credit where it's due. The novel is very multicultural and inclusive of people with different experiences and from different parts of the world. It also discusses what it means when the language inside you is not the language you are expected to speak – something that immigrant kids are very familiar with. I have been chided at times by family members by my tendency to talk in English but it's worse for kids who are born in a country different from the ones their parents may call their own.

The novel though just had too many loose ends, too many things that were not sufficiently discussed. Emma gets horribly incapacitating headaches. We are told they are migraines and that's about it. Weren't there any tests done? Is it a symptom of something more? Why doesn't anyone else seem more concerned about these headaches? Why isn't she seeing doctors so her headaches can be cured? The novel does not even go there.

The characters are rather flat. Emma mentions her Japanese friends, Madoka, in particular, and yet we know next to nothing about this girl. She's curiously empty, an echo of Emma's thoughts. This is similar to all the experiences Emma has had in Japan, almost as though they are not real experiences but imagined ones. There is also one scene that gave me pause. When Emma goes to help with the tsunami cleanup, someone or the other mentions that "even you, Emma-chan, came to help." It may not have been intended as such but the way this is worded gives it a distinctly colonialist tinge that I was uncomfortable with.

The whole "she has a choice to make" is not much of a choice because it is understood that she will be returning to Japan either now or at the end of the year. Taking this into consideration, the tension and the conflict is significantly reduced. There is also a curious portion about a Korean boy "Jae Suk" that goes nowhere. His attention is noted and left dangling. The romance is slow and I liked how it occurs gradually but the ending is strangely affected and Emma's "get someone else to look after your kid siblings" smacks of selfishness in a way that I don't think the author intended it to be.

It was a mixed bag of tricks for me, this novel. Emma was a bit of a Mary Sue and she grated on my nerves (a phrase that Christina used in one of her reviews and that lingers with me for obvious reasons). However, there were parts that made this book interesting and worth reading. It depends on the mood you are in when you read the novel and how willing you are to like the protagonist.
