



## **Blackbird Fly**

*Erin Entrada Kelly*

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Future rock star, or friendless misfit? That's no choice at all. In this debut tween novel, twelve-year-old Apple grapples with being different; with friends and backstabbers and following her dreams.

Apple has always felt a little different from her classmates. She and her mother moved to Louisiana from the Philippines when she was little, and her mother still cooks Filipino foods, makes mistakes with her English, and chastises Apple for becoming "too American." It becomes unbearable in middle school, when the boys—the stupid, stupid boys—in Apple's class put her name on the Dog Log, the list of the most unpopular girls in school. When Apple's friends turn on her and everything about her life starts to seem weird and embarrassing, Apple turns to music. If she can just save enough to buy a guitar and learn to play, maybe she can change herself. It might be the music that saves her . . . or it might be her two new friends, who show how special she really is.

## **Blackbird Fly Details**

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Author : Erin Entrada Kelly

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## From Reader Review Blackbird Fly for online ebook

### Jacki says

A beautiful and quick-reading story about a girl who learns to embrace her ethnic identity and focus on the inner beauty of those around her. We see this theme frequently, but Kelly handles it skillfully and focuses on a background (heroine and her mom are Filipinas) we don't see often in youth literature.

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### Francine Soleil says

This review is for an uncorrected proof. Also, I had typed up a better review, but technology malfunctioned and I had to write this review all over again, and I had already lost my train of thought so I'm not sure how successful this one is.

When I first heard about this book, I was definitely intrigued. It references the Beatles and my favorite Beatles song for the title. And being a Filipina, I won't deny that I wanted to see what a fellow Filipina has to offer to other nationalities about our own culture. However, I was VERY disappointed with this book and all the misinformation it contains. Maybe I'm just not the right audience for *Blackbird Fly*, but I will definitely NOT recommend this book to anyone. But if you're curious about it, I won't stop you from reading it.

Apple immigrated from the Philippines to Louisiana, America when she was very young. And she has always felt different. What I find odd is that she's the only Filipina or noticeable Asian in her whole school. Her mom had a Filipina friend who has been there for many years and even has her own children. She helped Apple's family to move to America. Are they really the only 2 Filipino families or Asians in that area? And I doubt that this book was written in a distant past setting as she owned a laptop and some sort of music player with earbuds. I feel like their situations were a little too outdated for a modern setting. It makes me quite curious how many places are still quite ignorant of Asian cultures, and whether the portrayal is accurate at all in this book.

There was this one scene that I can't seem to wrap my head around. Apple invited over her American friend for a sleepover at her house, and her mom served them garlic rice for dinner. One, Filipinos do not JUST eat rice. There's usually something else that goes with it. And two, Filipinos are very accommodating towards their guests, especially traditional ones like Apple's mom. They usually put a lot of effort in feeding visitors.

Another thing that bothered me was how the author incorporated Filipino or Cebuano culture into this book. She used a lot of terms or references that may not be easily understandable to other people, and she didn't explain a lot of them. But then again, there are a lot of books that do that as well. Though there were some terms that she did explain, but I feel were incorrect. I'm no Filipino expert, as I grew up speaking English first before my native language, but I did grow up in the Philippines and I have known these terms most of my life. She did not do a good job in explaining them.

She even included some Filipino sayings. The bad part was that they were translated into English that just made them seem senseless. Even I, who learned those sayings at an early age, did not pick up what the heck she meant until I realized they were really bad direct translations of those sayings. Taken out of the Filipino context, they didn't really make sense at all.

The only thing I probably liked about Apple was her love for music, and her passion to play the guitar and be a songwriter in the future. Though she didn't really get to do that until the later part of the book, where, I might add, I found it too convenient that she was some guitar prodigy. And she easily learned songs just days or weeks after she started learning how to play the instrument.

Overall, I found this book to be quite dumb and ridiculous. I know this is a middle grade book, and I may not really be the target audience, but I think that's no excuse to produce a dumbed down book. And I don't think you should even be teaching young kids to call Asians, dog-eaters. Either I'm missing something here, or this book is just all kinds of wrong. There is no excuse. There are a lot of brilliant Middle Grade books out there like *Harry Potter*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *Wonder*, etc. Adults should really give more credit to younger generations. And I hope someone would do a lot better on talking about Filipino culture.

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### **Richie Partington says**

Richie's Picks: **BLACKBIRD FLY** by Erin Entrada Kelly, Greenwillow, March 2015, 304p., ISBN: 978-0-06-223861-0

“While you look so sweetly and divine, I can feel you here.  
I see your eyes are busy kissing mine, and I do, I do.  
Wondering what it is they’re expecting to see,  
Should someone be looking at me?”  
-- George Harrison, “Let it Down”

“My mother frowned. ‘Your father gave you that nickname.’

“I thought of my father’s name written in black marker on Abbey Road. When you write your name on something, it means it’s really important to you, so it must have been one of his most prized possessions. I always thought that meant he was creative and smart. But if he was so creative and smart, why did he give me such a stupid nickname? Did he ever think about how it would make me feel? Did he ever think about how my name would look when I had to write it on things?

“I swallowed. ‘I don’t care.’ And why should I? The only information I had about my father besides the tape were a few fuzzy memories and a postcard from our island in the Philippines, and that’s not really information, it’s just a picture of where we lived. There aren’t even any people in the picture. Just a white sandy beach and blue water. My mother’s always saying that she moved us to America to have a better life, and I still haven’t figured out how Chapel Spring, Louisiana, is better than a white sandy beach. When we first moved here, I’d stare at the postcard and imagine my mother and father holding hands and standing with their feet in the water, but now I keep it in my nightstand under a pile of old notebooks. What’s the point?”

When Apple Yengko was younger, other children were not so outwardly judgmental about Apple being the only Asian-looking kid at school or about her having a heavily-accented mother who cooked differently. But now it is middle school, and many of Apple’s former friends are caught up in impressing boys and each other. No doubt their own insecurities make them feel that it’s a liability to hang with someone different, someone the not-so-bright boys make fun of by claiming she’s a dog-eater, someone who isn’t beautiful in that stereotypical manner.

Things might be different if this was a multicultural-rich metropolis, but Chapel Spring, Louisiana is anything but multicultural rich.

On top of her problems with her peers, Apple's immigrant mother won't even discuss Apple's obsessive desire to get a guitar and learn to play. In her mind, Apple figures that, like her dead hero George Harrison who left school to join The Beatles, Apple can escape Chapel Spring by becoming a great guitarist.

After her friends abandon her, in the wake of Apple's being listed on the "dog log" (the ugly girls list) that the boys compile, she becomes friends with Evan, a newly-arrived California boy who sees the local unintellegencia for who they are, and with Heleena, the most despised girl at school--the fat girl--who turns out to be an incredible vocalist. Thanks to a music teacher's generosity and the support of her new friends, Apple is able to at least make some of her dreams come true.

**BLACKBIRD FLY**, which is a phrase from the McCartney song "Blackbird," is a feel-good, there-is-a-better-way book in the same vein as James Howe's **THE MISFITS**.

For instance, when a so-called "beautiful" girl is traumatized by being put on the boys' "hot" list and then having a lot of hormonal boys falsely claiming that they got to "make out" with her, it reminded me of Joe's cousin Pam in **THE MISFITS**.

"And in the end, the love you take  
Is equal to the love you make."  
-- Paul McCartney

Reading **BLACKBIRD FLY** made me feel really happy.

Richie Partington, MLIS

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## **Brandy Painter says**

Originally posted here at Random Musings of a Bibliophile.

Blackbird Fly by Erin Entrada Kelly appealed to me for so many different reasons. I am always looking for good, MG school stories, and this is one about an immigration experience as well. It's a good one too with strong characters, excellent themes, and a realism about middle school that made me slightly sick to my stomach.

Analyn, known by her nickname, Apple, moved to the US from the Philippines when she was only four years old. In the years since she has learned a disdain for herself and her mother. She is embarrassed by the food her mother cooks and how she saves every penny. She longs to be more like her American classmates. It is not easy being the only Filipino in her small town Louisiana school. Things get worse when Apple's social climbing friends want to have boyfriends, and it is revealed that Apple has made the school's "Dog Log". Apple hates herself more and more as school becomes even less bearable. Things at home are not much better. All Apple wants to do is learn to play guitar, and her mother won't allow her. Through some new friends, a lot of awful mistakes, and some hard lessons Apple begins to look beyond the small mindset of middle school social dynamics and works hard to make her future dreams a reality.

This book is seriously well done. So well done it actually hurts to read it. Middle school is the worst. I actually had knots in my stomach as I read about Apple's life. The often racist teasing. The yearning to fit in and be the same. The realization that her friends were not behind her. It's a wretched time for anyone and Apple's story conveys that so well. All MG readers will understand Apple on some level. In addition to the typical middle school story we also have Apple's feelings on being an immigrant child. Her embarrassment and resentment of her mother is conveyed so well. This is something else that readers will be able to identify with. What middle schooler isn't embarrassed and resentful of their family? But through Apple's eyes and story, readers will also learn that everyone has a story. The majority of the supporting characters are just as well drawn as Apple and each has a perfect place and moment in her story.

Blackbird Fly is a book about learning who you are and embracing it. I like that it doesn't make everything perfect though. There is one scene that is a bit over the top as far as breakthrough moments go, but it fits so well into where it is in the story and everything else around it is so real, I'm okay with that. And there is no indication that life is sunshine and roses after that. I did feel the end wrapped up a little quickly, but I also like that the book is as short as it is.

I enjoyed reading Blackbird Fly and recommend it to anyone who loves good MG school stories. I will certainly be putting a copy of it in the hands of my daughter.

I read an e-galley made available by the publisher, Greenwillow Books, via Edelweiss. Blackbird Fly goes on sale on March 24th.

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### **The Library Lady says**

I waited to review this because I gave it to my 16 year old to read, first. She's got a lot in common with Apple. That includes love of the Beatles and the Filipina connection, though she's only half Filipina (mestiza), and our Filipino family comes from a more northern part of the Philippines.

My daughter really enjoyed this and so did I.

I do have to say that I found this smacked a little bit of *Wonder*, a book which I emphatically disliked because I found I just couldn't believe in the plot. There was a bit of wish fulfillment/perfect Hollywood ending here as well. But Apple is a vivid, **BELIEVABLE** girl, and the "mean girls" element here is so true to life that I found myself wincing in ancient reminiscence of my own jr high days. It was enough to make me feel tearful towards the end--I knew the dramatic scene near the end was hokey, but it was **RIGHT**.

So the flaws I saw as an adult reader won't mean much to any kid who can empathize with Apple. Good reading, good writing. *Salamat*, Erin Entrada Kelly for this book!

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### **Tasha says**

Apple just doesn't fit in. Her Filipino mother cooks food that no American kids eat. Plus she is so strict that Apple isn't allowed to take any music classes at school because it might impact her other more important grades. Apple though desperately wants to learn to play the guitar. When they left the Philippines, she took

just one picture and a tape of the Beatles that had belonged to her dead father. Apples does have friends, but once they discover that she is on the Dog Log, a list of the ugliest girls at school, they stop hanging around with her. Apple decides to start saving up for a guitar and as she does that she starts to make new friends, other kids that have been singled out as odd or different. But one misstep with a teacher's wallet marks Apple as a thief and that is all it takes for her former friends to really turn against her. Apple has to figure out how being different can actually be a very good thing.

This tween novel has a strong mix of a multicultural main character combined with middle school popularity and racism. Kelly does not flinch away from the blatant racism that teenagers can engage in as well as the casual hate that they throw at each other, particularly kids who are different from them. Kelly's writing has a friendly, straight-forward tone even as she deals with the drama of both middle school and a parent who is over protective. Using music as a language that bridges new friendships and new understandings works particularly well and serves as a backbone for the entire novel.

Apple is a character with lots going on in her life. She faces racism on a daily basis at school and in turn takes it out on her mother, turning her back on much of their Filipino culture. She is embarrassed by her mother and angry at her lack of support for Apple's musical dreams. As Apple puts together a misguided plan to run away, readers will hope that she finds a way to live in the life that she already has, particularly because they will see how special she is long before Apple can realize it herself.

A great tween read, this book offer complexity and diversity in a story about individuality and friendship. Appropriate for ages 10-13.

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### **Alison says**

I ADORE this book. It's such a great, contemporary middle-grade read--that time when friends and friendships change, when boys become BOYS, when you're so self-aware and also so not aware--it's all handled so perfectly. I related to the sense of being different, the feeling of wanting to spend those years in a hole, to grow up quickly, to escape the now. This is a book full of hope. It reminded me of what it's like to be this age--the bad and the really, really good pain of growing up. Also, the last chapter was perfect.

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### **Giselle says**

My thanks to *Greenwillow Books* & Edelweiss

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**Point of View:** Single (Analyn/Apple)

**Writing:** First Person | Past Tense

**Setting:** Louisiana

**Genre:** Middle Grade | Realistic Fiction

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I still cannot believe I ended up loving this book because at first I thought the whole thing was just so not interesting. I'm not one of those who love to read about girls at such a young age being all boy-crazy and

whose main goal in life is to be one of the popular. **I'm glad it turned out to be such a beautiful book, though.**

Analyn, who was also known as **Apple**, was not a character that made me fall in love with right from the start. I couldn't blame her for being conscious of what others thought of her because she was just a little girl and being different (since she was a Filipina) didn't help either. Nonetheless, it bugged me to some extent that she let those people affect her and the way she handled the problem wasn't ideal. So it's safe to say I wasn't her biggest fan at the time. Later on, though, I couldn't help loving Apple. She became a vibrant character and I just loved her.

**Evan, the new kid, was another reason to love this book.** There wasn't anything I didn't like about this little boy. He was just way too awesome and mature for a young kid. He was funny too, so yeah, he was perfect.

**The writing was great as the flow from one scene to the next was smooth and the author had a way to keep things interesting, which made the story flew by pretty fast.** I also loved that there were parts about Filipino culture added in the book; it was pretty neat to be able learn new culture and enjoy the book at the same time.

In short, **it was an exceptional book about bullying, true meaning of friendship and being comfortable in your own skin.** I adored the message, the storyline and the characters. I think it's a great book for everyone to enjoy, especially young people.

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### **Kathy Martin says**

This is the story of middle schooler Apple Yengko. She and her mother emigrated from the Philippines after her father's death when Apple was four. She is the only Filipino in her Southern Louisiana middle school. And middle school is one of her main problems.

Middle school can often be a time of casual cruelty when every kid wants to be just like all the other kids and every kid is sure that everyone is watching them all the time. It can be especially cruel if a kid is outside of the norm in some way. Apple's best friend Alyssa has bought into the myth and is determined to have a boyfriend and be one of the popular crowd. When Apple finds herself on the Dog List - the list of the ugliest girls in school - Alyssa dumps her in a very cruel manner.

Apple wants to be a musician. She is a huge fan of the Beatles and wants to play the guitar like George Harrison. However, her mother refuses to get her a guitar and wants her to concentrate on her schoolwork and getting a good education. Americanized Apple is sometimes embarrassed by her mother who still speaks with an accent, still cooks Filipino foods, and still spouts her Filipino values.

Apple's attitude starts to change when she meets a new boy in school from California named Evan Temple. Evan isn't swept up in the middle grade desire to be like everyone else. He accepts her just like she is and doesn't want her to change. Well, except maybe, to stop letting the crowd influence her. Apple also gets a chance to get to know another girl on the Dog List. Helena has been hiding the fact that she has an amazing voice.

I felt all of Apple's pain as she tried to make a place for herself in her middle school. I also felt a lot of happiness when I saw her deciding to stop letting the crowd set her value.

Middle graders - misfits or not - will see a lot they recognize in Apple's story.

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### **Ms. Yingling says**

Apple (aka Analyn) rails against her mother's insistence at embracing their Filipino culture in embarrassing ways like insisting on calling her Apple. Apple's father has passed away and she doesn't have much information about him, only that he loved the Beatles. Apple is having a horrific year at school because she has been listed as number three on the "dog log", a list of ugly girls in her school. Her friends Alyssa and Gretchen are appalled that she is on the list and really want to cut ties with her, so she's glad that a new boy, Evan, seems to appreciate her for who she is. Apple really wants to buy a guitar in order to feel a connection with her late father, and thinks about stealing money from a teacher. She puts the money back, and the teacher offers to loan her a school guitar and teach her how to play. There are a variety of other school dramas, including a costume dance, and Apple learns to embrace her culture and starts to see her own worth after making friends who also have some social problems.

**Strengths:** This had good descriptions of cultural aspects of the Philippines that are very rare in middle grade fiction. Apple is a likable character who is trying her best to work through difficult situations, and Evan is the kind of student we wish all of ours would be-- he sticks up for Apple even when he doesn't know her well. There are a few students who are still interested in the Beatles.

**Weaknesses:** It never really makes sense to me that Apple is such a social outsider, except that she is "other" in Louisiana and subject to a lot of prejudice, but this could have been clearer. I wanted to see the boys who came up with the "dog log" soundly punished.

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### **Josiah says**

Debut novels are special, particularly for authors who went on to become famous. What was that first published effort like from a storyteller who eventually set the world on fire with her writing? What does a lifetime of pent-up creativity look like when it finally spills onto the page for the world to marvel at? Though Erin Entrada Kelly's second novel attracted favorable reviews and her third (*Hello, Universe*) won the Newbery Medal as the most distinguished American juvenile book of 2017, *Blackbird Fly* in my opinion is superior to both, comparable to some of the best children's books of its era. I consider it on the same level as Clare Vanderpool's *Moon Over Manifest*, Marion Dane Bauer's *Little Dog, Lost*, and Peter Brown's *The Wild Robot*, all legitimate Newbery candidates in their respective release years. *Blackbird Fly* is a raw, emotional journey for twelve-year-old Analyn "Apple" Yengko that the reader is sure to identify with. The exhilaration of being swept along by a narrative like a rushing river is part of this book's DNA, making it a pleasure to read even when the story's events are as uncomfortable as the low moments of real life. It's an extraordinary artistic achievement.

Apple has lived in the United States ever since she and her mother immigrated from the Philippines when Apple was little, after her father died. Her mother is strict, insistent that nothing get between Apple and a serious education. This puts a crimp in Apple's social life; kids aren't comfortable hanging out at a friend's house where not only is foreign food served, but the mother has no sense of humor. Apple is fortunate to have Gretchen and Alyssa as friends at school, two fairly popular girls who eat lunch with her every day.

Apple's strongest personal ambition is music-related, in honor of her late father. It was his love of the Beatles that Apple clung to when she arrived in America. She listens to the band's albums over and over, memorizing their songs and imagining herself playing guitar and writing blockbuster music. Apple begs her mother for a guitar, but she delays the decision or refuses every time. Academics are important, she chides, not music. Apple should search for fulfillment inside the classroom.

This uneasy balance between dreaming and studying has held steady so far, but the calm waters of elementary school turn choppy as sixth grade begins. Alyssa and Gretchen are fixated on popularity and being attractive to boys, and Apple's reputation takes a huge hit when she's put on the "Dog Log", a consensus ranking of the least-attractive girls in sixth grade. Apple never considered herself gorgeous, but she never thought she was ugly, either. Why do the boys consider her one of the ten least-appealing girls in their grade? Is it her slanted eyes or light brown skin? Alyssa and Gretchen suddenly seem nervous at being associated with Apple. In a matter of days, she goes from a girl with friends to an outcast. It stings badly when the boys call her a "dog-eater" because of her Asian heritage and bark at her in the halls, but Alyssa and Gretchen's cruelty hurts a lot more. How did sixth grade become such a nightmare?

Dropping to the lowest social level with Heleena, the most overweight girl in school, wasn't Apple's plan for middle school. Shunned by everyone, Apple fantasizes about running away to New Orleans, learning to play guitar, and setting up shop as a street performer. No one there would have any idea what a Dog Log is. Then a new kid enrolls in Apple's school, having just moved here from California. Evan Temple has quirks, but he's harmless, unlike the girls Apple recently considered her friends. Evan is a voracious reader, and doesn't mind hanging out with Apple in the library at lunch. Neither of them have friends to sit with, anyway. Evan is observant and witty, but he's a little too counterculture to fit in with the cool kids, and he's okay with it. He had a Filipino friend in California, so he doesn't see Apple's ethnicity as weird, and she doesn't have to beg him to believe she doesn't eat dogs. He's even comfortable with her mother, whose foreign traits have always put Apple on edge when her friends were around. What if they resented Apple because she doesn't have a typical American mom?

With Evan stoking the flame of Apple's creativity, she musters the courage to speak to Mr. Z, the school music teacher, about giving her guitar lessons. Apple never would have taken the chance of rejection without Evan's encouragement; she doesn't even own a guitar, and knows her mother is against her getting one. How can anyone master an instrument without having it in their hands? But Mr. Z surprises Apple, as Evan had a hunch he would. He's willing to lend her a guitar. At long last, Apple has the opportunity to follow in her father's footsteps and learn what richness music can add to her life, if she can keep her borrowed instrument out of her mother's sight. Strumming the sweet strings of her guitar sets Apple's soul free, but it's more than the blissful acoustic harmony that eases her pain. Just as important is having a friend like Evan, who cares more about the shape of her personality than the shape of her eyes. Evenings on the front porch discussing music and life have a different energy in the company of a fun, reliable friend. Apple's future in middle school and music may be uncertain, but her story isn't turning out too badly after all.

When you're a pariah among your peers, you'll try anything to downplay the differences that drive them away. Apple has been known by that nickname most of her life, but now she tries to convince everyone to call her Analyn. Would not sharing a name with a round, red fruit help her popularity? Even Apple is skeptical. "But what was the point of a new name when everyone knows who you really are?" Her physical Filipino characteristics are clear to see, and everyone in school knows about her inclusion on the Dog Log. A fresh name won't change the way people already look at you. Releasing the music in her heart would be a better way to prove herself an interesting person, but her mother shuts down Apple's attempts to get plugged into music. She's a woman of caution, which shows in a saying she's often repeated. "When you say something out loud, it makes it a big truth. Best to keep it in your mind and keep it small". Apple's mother

has tried to forget the life they left behind in the Philippines, afraid the grief over her husband's death would haunt them both. She ignores Apple's argument that she can't be happy without finding out if she has musical talent, preventing her daughter from discovering the person she is becoming. Apple recognizes that earning good grades in school is important, but music would nourish her intellect, not steal from it. Having a well-rounded life and mind means delving as deeply into art as academics, and neglecting that balance won't bring Apple an optimal future. We all need a variety of interests to spice up life, a palette of many colors to paint our story. The closer Apple gets to finding her potential in music, the happier she is.

The potency of *Blackbird Fly* is in Apple's swift, surreal descent into being despised almost universally at school. The narrative always stays a step ahead of where we think it is. When you're suddenly hated by people who liked you, it's a nightmarish feeling, and this book cultivates it impeccably. Whether or not you did anything to provoke the disdain, the shame is intense, and even enduring Apple's alongside her is uncomfortable. Evan is a crucial release to the pressure valve, a bright spot parting the clouds. His opinions are honest, thoughtful counsel for Apple in these trying times. Once, she asks him why he stood up to a boy who was harassing her. The kid was a lot bigger than Evan; wasn't he scared? "No," Evan says. "Why would I be? He might be bigger than me, but he's dumb." When Apple points out that dumbness wouldn't have shielded Evan from harm, he shrugs and says, "Let's say he broke my nose. Big deal. My nose will recover, but he'll still be dumb." That simple truth is the key to peace when you're accosted by a confederacy of dunces. They may inflict damage, even grievous damage, but you'll heal in time. Long after you've recuperated, they'll still be prisoner to their own ignorance. When he said those words to Apple, I think that's the moment I first loved Evan. He's one of those rare characters who lift the reader's spirit even after the book is finished. Evan again demonstrates his earnest wisdom when Apple says he can't understand being an outsider like she is. He can, though; he points out a few facts that show how out of step he is with his peers. But why don't their barbed words bloody him as they do Apple? Evan sees why. "I don't listen to anything they say, because I know that whatever they think about me is wrong...But you think they're right." It's very hard to not believe the crowd when they bellow that you're no good, that you're ugly or a thief or destined to be a failure. They shout down our responses, delighting in the emotional lacerations they cause. But there's only so much harm they can do if we refuse to believe their lies about us. We know who we are at our core, and if we can hold to that in spite of the shouting, we'll be okay. The opinions of the hateful never paint a truer picture than what we know about ourselves. Coming to terms with that is the biggest test Apple faces.

Of Erin Entrada Kelly's first three books, *Blackbird Fly* was, to me, far and away the worthy Newbery Medal recipient, a novel I would have been overjoyed to see bear that shiny gold sticker on the front cover. I definitely rate it three and a half stars. The themes are rich and complex, the writing fast-paced and efficient, the characters all realistic vessels for the sparkling narrative that flows through them. Apple's feelings are universal to people who have ever been rejected and reviled, reminding us we're not alone however extreme our circumstances seem. Evan Temple is one of my favorite characters I've read about in years, a fascinating kid whose vocabulary and self-assurance are impressive, but not too good to be true. Most authors miss that mark when dreaming up a character like Evan, but Erin Entrada Kelly scores a bullseye. Thank you for this insightful, deeply felt book, Ms. Kelly. I love it.

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### **Ian Wood says**

This is the complete review as it appears at my blog dedicated to reading, writing (no 'rithmatic!), movies, & TV. Blog reviews often contain links which are not reproduced here, nor will updates or modifications to the blog review be replicated here. Graphic and children's reviews on the blog typically feature two or three images from the book's interior, which are not reproduced here.

Note that I don't really do stars. To me a book is either worth reading or it isn't. I can't rate it three-fifths worth reading! The only reason I've relented and started putting stars up there is to credit the good ones, which were being unfairly uncredited. So, all you'll ever see from me is a five-star or a one-star (since no stars isn't a rating, unfortunately).

Analyn Pearl Yengko, aka Apple, is a Filipino girl who has moved to the USA, and is living in fictional Chapel Spring, Louisiana. She's very conscious of her appearance and doesn't consider herself "American". She learns what losers her "friends" are one day when jerk Jake makes a jackass "joke" about all Asians eating dogs, and how Analyn is on the Dog Log - a virtual list of ugliest girls in school that some boys create each year.

Given that the author is a Filipino and hates carrots, it seems to me that this novel might be very much autobiographical, at least in its roots, although that's just a guess. The biggest problem for me with it was that it's first person PoV, which is actually Worst Person PoV. That said, this effort actually didn't nauseate me. Some authors can make it work, and this is evidently one of those!

Analyn wants to become a rock star. Improbably, her favorite band is the Beatles because all she left the Philippines with was a tape from her deceased dad. The tape was Abbey Road, the last album the Beatles recorded together, although not the last to be released. Now Analyn has a whole set of Beatles albums of her own, although how she managed to get those if her mom is as stingy as we're led to believe is a mystery.

Analyn wants to buy a guitar she's seen in a store, but her mother is very negative on pretty much anything Analyn wants to do, except that in a fit, Analyn finally gets her mom to quit calling her Apple. My prediction at that point was that, given her love of The Beatles and her desire to play guitar, Analyn will be proud to be Apple by the end of this novel. It felt that predictable. But it is a middle grade novel, so I tried not to down-grade it too much for the trite factor!

The author does make the classic debut novel mistake, however, of having the character look at herself in the mirror so we can get a description of what she looks like. I think it was even a bigger mistake in this case because it's not necessary to know exactly what she looks like. In fact, I think the novel would have been better had we had no idea (other than that she's Filipino, of course) what she looks like.

On the subject of cliché, the new cool guy in school has his hair in his eyes, but on the other side of this coin, he's improbably not actually the new cool kid. The A-list girls take an immediate dislike to him because he's not fawning over them, and he almost gets into a fight with one of the A-list boys at the dance over them making fun of one of the dog list girls - one who is trope-ish-ly overweight.

I think she had the new boy hail from California because there's perhaps a Filipino population there, so he's got an 'in' with our main characters and doesn't think she's ugly. That said, the author offered no explanation for why he and his mom moved from California to a penny-ante little town in the middle of Louisiana. His mom is an artist, so it's not like she had to move there for her work. She paints abstracts, but why she wouldn't want to live by the sea, or in the forests, or in the mountains, for pure inspiration is unexplained.

For that matter, why did Analyn's mom move there? Yes, we're told there's a nurse shortage and so she got in on that, but is there really a huge nurse shortage in that little town? It would have made more sense had they moved to a large city where a shortage might be expected. And why would the US hospitals be looking to hire nurses from the Philippines given how picky they are about what schooling nurses have had? This wasn't well thought through, and it makes little sense to adults, but I guess the author thought it wouldn't matter for a middle grade novel.

On the up-side, the novel did make for an interesting and engaging read. There's a subtle undercurrent of humor running through the text which I appreciated even as I cringed at some of the clichés: school bullies, cliques, the overweight girl, the snotty cheerleader type, mean boys, the derided teacher, the beloved teacher, and so on.

The bottom line is that this story, for the grade it's written, isn't bad at all. It's a very fast read: the lines are widely spaced, so despite it being ostensibly almost three hundred pages long, it would probably be only half that if it were single-spaced and in a slightly smaller font size.

The situations Analyn gets into are reasonable and realistic, and her behavior, for her age, is understandable, so for me, overall, this rates as a worthy read.

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### **Jackie Mackelhenny says**

I was fortunate enough to recently receive an ARC of *Blackbird Fly*. This is a middle grade must read. I not only fell in love with the main character Apple Yenko, but also with the way the writer approached each character. Erin Entrada Kelly has a real sense of the way preteens view the world. She is one of the few that hasn't forgotten. I think her young readers may see her as a friend, much in the same way as those of my generation saw Judy Blume.

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### **Sue (Hollywood News Source) says**

I've been terribly busy lately. Hence, why this mini review took so much longer to write. **But, I promise myself I had to do it.**

**Blackbird Fly is a very difficult story to read. It is not because it is poorly written, or in any way that you think, but because it challenges me as a person.**

The protagonist of the story, Apple is much more than a character I could relate to. A Filipino main character who migrated in the US at an early age, is currently having a mid-life crisis figuring herself out. That was me. I was her in Elementary and throughout High School, even now when I'm in my early twenties, I could still see Apple flaring within me every once in a while. Identically and culturally speaking, we are very much attuned. That never happened to me before. I rarely see myself and my culture get represented in any medium, I consumed. This is why, I'm bloody terrific to have *Blackbird Fly* in my life.

*Blackbird Fly* follows the story of Apple Yengko, an aspiring musician. Having moved to Louisiana from the Philippines when she was little, she always felt estranged by her Filipino roots. Her mother expects her to embrace her culture, but Apple always feels she's inadequate to belong.

In a meanwhile, her friends ditch her after learning she is part of the "Dog Log", a list of the least attractive girls in the school.

Honestly, I don't have anything much to say about this book, aside from my in depth analysis of the racism, discrimination and the diaspora we regularly experience. So if you want to stop reading now, you should go ahead. **In other words, YES, you should definitely get it, especially if you want to read something that**

### **doesn't conform to Middle Grade's white kid woes.**

As I already lamented above, Apple has a difficult time celebrating her culture. According to our default's standard, her mom has an accent that isn't pleasing to the ears. She still cooks food that would be considered unappealing, and so on. That cause, an understandably embarrassment from Apple's side. All of her friends are white and they necessarily don't understand her culture. For the most part, they doesn't want to.

Most of the kids in her school subjected her to vicious taunts about her identity. Apple has been called "dog eater", because she's Asian. Her identity is constantly ripped off from her, kids often interchange her ethnicity with *others*. This is not a surprising scenario. White children are just as brutal with their minority alienation as much as their parents and forefathers. **Which reminds me, how do white children learn racism and hurtful remarks? Did they heard it from the medium they regularly consume or do they constantly hear it from their parents and adults around them?**

Blackbird Fly has a very special place in my heart. It makes me even more thankful to my parents, who sacrificed a great deal of things, so we could live a comfortable life.

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### **Oak Lawn Public Library - Youth Services says**

Apple Yengko, is 12 years old, and attends Chapel Springs Middle School in Louisiana. She believes every persons has 3 "Interesting Facts" (Ifs) about them, but her facts are not so good: She has slanted eyes, a weird, frugal mother and no father, and has a Filipino name (her nickname which is a round fruit). She is used to hanging out with her "friends" Gretchen and Alyssa, but when she is the 3rd ugliest girl in the school on the "Dog List," her friends drop like flies. Alyssa is smart and independent, but then everyone has it out for her once she gets on this list. She is the target of all kinds of attacks, especially when she befriends the new California guy (Evan) and the heaviest girl in school (Heleena). However, Apple realizes that she is better off with her new friends, who encourage her to be unique and pursue her dream of playing the guitar. I thought that this was an enjoyable book that both male and female middles school students would enjoy. It is a book about finding one's identity, choosing the right friends and realizing what truly matters in life.

4/5 Stars

Reviewed By: Jen T.

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### **Sandra Waugh says**

Just wonderful.

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### **Sofia Galvez says**

5 Platypires for Blackbird Fly

I first heard about Blackbird Fly from the We Need Diverse Books blog and then my book club picked it to read. Oh how much I freaking loved this book. As a child of an immigrant I was able to relate to Apple in so many way. I just felt a deep connection and I believe others would feel the same way.

Erin Entrada Kelly truly captured what it's liked to be in middle school and trying to navigate the social structures within it. Oh the flashbacks. I felt I knew each character in the book in real life and could match them up with someone I once knew. Plus The Beatles music was an added bonus.

Overall it was just a great book. I would recommend this book for children and adults.

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### **Brittany says**

This was a sweet middle school book about becoming comfortable with yourself even though you are different, learning to accept others despite what the majority may say about them, and confronting the things that make you uncomfortable and sad. The 4th star is for the huge, huge Beatles influence- and because I am a George Harrison gal through and through.

I felt it, I liked Apple, and I think you will too.

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### **Jillian (bookishandnerdy) says**

i fucking loved this. it's an adorable, uplifting coming of age story. and i found myself bursting into tears from time to time because the main character is a filipino girl. to finally read from the pov of someone who is like me who i can relate to 10000% on so many levels. this was a book i needed when i was growing up. this was the book i needed for so long. i cannot wait to read more from this author. i just absolutely loved this.

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### **Gail Nall says**

Ah, this book! I love a good, realistic, no-holds-barred MG, and this is definitely one. The main character, Apple, struggles to fit in with her "friends" at school, and some of these scenes are so very real that they're almost hard to read. Such a great, diverse book! Highly recommended.

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