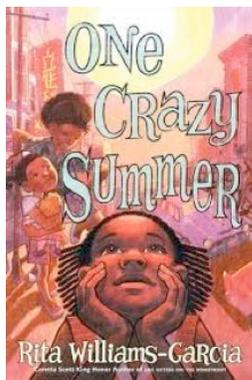


Children's Book Review

Williams-Garcia, R. (2010) *One Crazy Summer*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers. 240 pp., ISBN: 0060760907, \$6.00 (Ages 10-15).

Reviewed by Kristi Tedeschi, Eastern University, U.S.A.



One Crazy Summer is a book set in the summer of 1968 when three New York sisters (ages 7, 9, and 11) travel to Oakland, California, to spend the summer with their mother who left them seven years ago. All they know of their mother is the disapproving stories they hear from Big Ma, their grandmother, who is helping their Pa raise them. They have no idea of the adventure that is in store for them when they find a mother who does not seem to care about them. She brings them to a Black Panther summer camp. Over the course of 28 days in Oakland, they slowly learn about the circumstances of their mother's life while being thrown into the tumultuous times of the 1960s and the Black Panther cause. Oakland is nothing like New York, and their world gets completely turned upside down. Through their ups and downs in that summer, the girls each learn valuable lessons. In the end it opens the door to the beginning of a relationship with their mother, as well as opens their eyes to the world around them, one in which they begin to see that things are not always what they seem.

In this story the three girls are being raised in a fairly affluent New York neighborhood. They live comfortably with big Sunday dinners complete with banana pudding and nightly bubble baths with Mr. Bubble. They never want for anything, especially the home-cooked meal that they receive every night for dinner. Their father has enough money to fly them all to California, as well as send them there with over \$200 spending money. They are also being raised by Big Ma, who is from the South and believes in chores, proper manners, and strict bedtimes. She believes that the children should always watch how they act in public and never make "big negro spectacles of themselves" to prove to the world that they are proper and civilized (p. 11). When the girls get to Oakland, however, they must hand over the spending money to their mother so they can eat for the next month, which seems to be only nightly Chinese takeout from Ming's. Their mother is a poet who spends all of her time holed up in her kitchen writing poetry, printing posters and signs for the Black Panthers, and conserving every spare bit of ink and paper. The girls are sent off to a summer camp run by the Panthers to spend their days learning about the "cause" and their responsibilities.

Throughout their time in California the girls are made more aware of the prejudice and injustices that exist in the world. In New York they are sheltered from this life. They attend what seems to be a relatively diverse school (from

Delphine's description of the children's names in her class) and live a middle- to upper-class life in which they are not exposed to the troubles that occur. When they get to California, however, they realize that not all people live this life. This is pointed out to them when Fern (the youngest sister) is taunted for carrying a White baby doll; Mean Lady Ming (the owner of the Chinese food store) assumes they are coming in for free eggrolls she has been giving out to poor Black children; the owner of the paper store calls them thieves; and multiple groups of tourists want to take their picture as if they are on "monkeys on display" (p. 214). The girls start to realize that some of the behaviors that Big Ma instills in them, such as always saying ma'am and sir and always staying quiet in public (even when facing discrimination), are furthering the paradigm of inferiority. The sisters learn to think and speak for themselves over the course of the summer, not only because their mother would not speak for them, but also because they are learning how, even as young children, they can be agents of change in their community and stand up for themselves, which may have been their mother's viewpoint all along.

This book presents a different image of the Black Panthers than the negative ones to which many people may have been exposed. Like Delphine, the oldest sister in the book, many readers may have thought of the Black Panthers as militant radicals who carried rifles and enforced their beliefs with fear and aggression. The book shows that many Black Panther groups ran soup kitchens, summer camps, clothing drives, and Sickle Cell testing facilities. In the story, Delphine and her sisters struggled with their changing beliefs. When they saw the good deeds that were being done every day at the camp, they questioned the negative and derogatory information that Pa and Big Ma told them about this group. Although this book tells a fictional story, Williams-Garcia reviewed resources from that time, including official Black Panther news and communications, to present as close to an actual account as possible. Throughout the story, the girls each matured in their own way and had to form their own thoughts and opinions.

This story alone may not change anyone's view of the Black Panthers, but would sufficiently challenge readers to question what they have known of the history and to learn more about the facts and actual events that occurred. I would recommend this book for middle school students. Not only would this book encourage students to think about the challenges for black children during the 1960s, but also investigating the theme of self-discovery could guide students to make decisions based on knowledge rather than other people's opinions. Too often, students fall into stereotyping people or groups based on their parents' or family members' ideas. This great book will help them read and think critically before making decisions and become their own person rather than fall in with the crowd.