

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – Queenie

Reviewer name: Emma Raymond

Book title: Queenie

Author name: Candice Carty-Williams

Genre: Literary fiction

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: Queenie is the book's central character, a young black woman living in South London and working as a journalist. At the beginning of the book she and her long-term boyfriend decide to 'take a break' from their relationship, and Queenie finds herself flailing. She makes increasingly questionable choices in her love life, which in turn lead to problems in her career and amongst her friends. As the book goes on we see Queenie date men who treat her terribly and fetishize her body; we see her treated dismissively, sometimes callously, at work; and we observe how the gentrification of her home, Brixton, makes these injustices all the more unbearable as she struggles to find space for herself both literally and figuratively. Despite dealing with serious issues, including the lived experience of racism, the book is consistently funny, not least because Queenie maintains a critically wry view of the world amidst the chaotic misadventures in her personal life. Her friends, 'The Corgis', are also an uplifting source of entertainment, as are Queenie's British-Jamaican family, whose importance to the novel and to its titular character, increases as the book progresses.

What you liked: The book opens with Queenie at the doctor's, having a gynaecological exam while texting the boyfriend she is having problems with. When the doctor performing the exam is unsure of something, she asks another doctor into the room for help. 'I saw a cleaner mopping up some sick in the hallway, why don't you get him in here to have a look too?' Queenie says, when they suggest a third doctor might be needed. It is refreshing to find such a frank, funny scene about something so uncomfortable and unglamorous - yet familiar to most women - in the book's opening pages. The book also contains an unflinching exploration of the effects of gentrification. There is a heart-rending moment when Queenie discovers that a Caribbean bakery she loved as a child has been replaced by a hipster burger bar because it could no longer afford to pay rent in that part of London. I am not sure I've read another novel that conveys the personal, dislocating trauma of gentrification so poignantly. One final aspect of the book that I loved was the depiction of the friendships between Queenie and her 'Corgis'. The friendships are not romanticized. They are not all best of friends all the time, and in fact the Corgis are not friends with each other at all at the start of the book, and only become so when Queenie introduces them to one another in a Whatsapp group. This rings true - Queenie has kept friends from her childhood in South London, while making new ones in adulthood, at university and at work. The women are very different to one another, and Queenie's relationship with each of them differs. They each offer her a different kind of friendship and support (or not, in the case of one Corgi).

Who should read this book?: I can imagine that a lot of this book's readers are young women, particularly women of colour, but everyone should read it. It centralizes an often marginalized experience, and so offers a fresh, much-needed perspective on enduring themes such as dating, adjusting to the expectations of adulthood, and confronting demons from your past that appear in works like *Bridget Jones*. The novel deals with painful and timely political issues, including racism and gentrification, but it does so while being funny, fast-moving and investing deeply in its

characters, so is a must-read for those who want to be entertained by a story of personal drama, as well as for those who seek out profound and 'important' books.

Any additional comments?: I repeat, everyone should read it.