

Book Title: Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx

Author: Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

Publisher: Scribner

Year: 2003

Type: Nonfiction

Book Review by Melissa Olean

Graduate Student

St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN

smoclean@wmconnect.com

Random Family began by introducing the reader to a character named Jessica and from there it branched out to characters who knew Jessica or were in some way linked to her. This book really examined the lifestyle that is considered the norm in the urban area of the Bronx. Teenage motherhood, violence, drugs, incarcerated parents, and extreme poverty were seemingly expected and accepted. Most of the girls became pregnant in their early teens, following the same path as their mothers and their grandmothers. It was commonplace that the teen girls' mothers took in their grandchildren and raised them as their own children. Of course, these grandmothers were themselves only in their early 30s.

I was amazed at the welfare situations of the people in this book. It seemed they were constantly being evicted from apartments and missing appointments that were necessary to maintain the support. Another common theme was the infidelity among the men. Many of the men had multiple girlfriends and children with each of them. The women knew about each other and didn't really like it, but they seemed to accept it as the way of life.

One thing that I found extremely disturbing at several different times during the story was when it was discovered that a boyfriend or stepfather had abused a small child and the mother of the child continued to stay with the boyfriend. The women just seemed to settle for whatever the men did to them or their family, because they were men and that's "just the way they are." The children were often left with random people so that the mothers could go out dancing. Many times the children had been left with so many different people that they couldn't even pinpoint who had abused the child. This horrific disregard for children was difficult for me to understand.

Many times in the story, people had the chance to leave the Bronx to go somewhere else and start over, but they never went far or for very long. They had such strong loyalty to family and friends that it kept them there, even if there had been abuse or violence. This was something I could not comprehend. Some of the people in the story tried to go to school, whether it was to obtain a GED or study at a community college, but usually circumstances of family or money interfered with them continuing their education.

In this book, the author told of people who came into relatively large sums of money for whatever reason, how the news spread like wildfire, and how suddenly everyone was on the doorstep of this person. She described how the person typically was overly generous and loaned money to others and fed them, until it was no longer available for their own children.

I highly recommend this book to anyone. I never wanted to put it down and even at the end of 400-plus pages, I wanted to read and learn more. I learned so much about the

cycles of poverty and the life of many people in the Bronx. Some of it was hard for me to swallow, perhaps because it is a way of life that is so different from my own midwestern existence. At any rate, the author—who lived much of what was depicted in the book—wrote one of the best books I have ever read.