

# Book Review



## Two Against the World

This novel's title characters are an unlikely couple.

BY JOHN GREEN

WHEN I began reading contemporary fiction in high school, I remember feeling that each book was an absolute revelation. Whether I was reading Michael Crichton or Amy Tan or Tom Robbins, there had never been anything like it before in my life. The novel's novelty passes, of course. I'm

### ELEANOR & PARK

By Rainbow Rowell.  
325 pp. St. Martin's Griffin. \$18.99.  
(Young adult; ages 14 to 18)

35 now. I've read a dozen "we brought back the dinosaurs and they are mad" books. I've seen the conventions, and I've seen them interrogated.

But I have never seen anything quite like "Eleanor & Park." Rainbow Rowell's first novel for young adults is a beautiful, haunting love story — but I have seen those. It's set in 1986, and God knows I've seen that. There's bullying, sibling rivalry, salvation through music and comics, a monstrous stepparent — and I know, we've seen all this stuff. But you've never seen "Eleanor & Park." Its observational precision and richness make for very special reading.

Eleanor is a "big girl" with bright red hair (kids on the bus call her Big Red, and she describes herself as resembling a barmaid) who has just returned to her home in Omaha, after being kicked out for a year and forced to stay with acquaintances. Every moment Eleanor is home is terrifying and claustrophobic — she shares a room with a mess of siblings and lives in constant fear of offending her abusive alcoholic stepfather, Richie. She's also poor — she cannot afford a toothbrush or batteries for her Walkman. (Some readers may initially find this unrealistic, but through the novel one comes to have a better understanding of how poverty interacts with abuse to marginalize and oppress.)

Park is a half-Korean kid who's passably popular but separated from the larger social order of his school both by his race and by his passion for comic books and good music. On the first day

of school, Eleanor sits down next to him on the bus. Over time, she begins reading his comics over his shoulder. Then he lends them to her. They bond over music. Eventually, they begin holding hands on the rides to and from school.

The hand-holding, by the way, is intense. "Holding Eleanor's hand was like holding a butterfly. Or a heartbeat." Evocative sensual descriptions are everywhere in this novel, but they always feel true to the characters. Eleanor describes Park's trench coat as smelling "like Irish Spring and a little bit like potpourri and like something she couldn't describe any other way than boy." Park watches Eleanor's mouth so closely that he "could see that her lips had freckles, too." After Eleanor castigates him for saying she looks "nice," Park thinks: "Eleanor was right: She never looked nice. She looked like art, and art wasn't supposed to look nice; it was supposed to make you feel something." And they are relentlessly, deliciously fascinated with the feel of each other's touch. Two-thirds of the way through the book, when Park realizes they've only touched

north of the chin and south of the wrists, I felt as flabbergasted as he does.

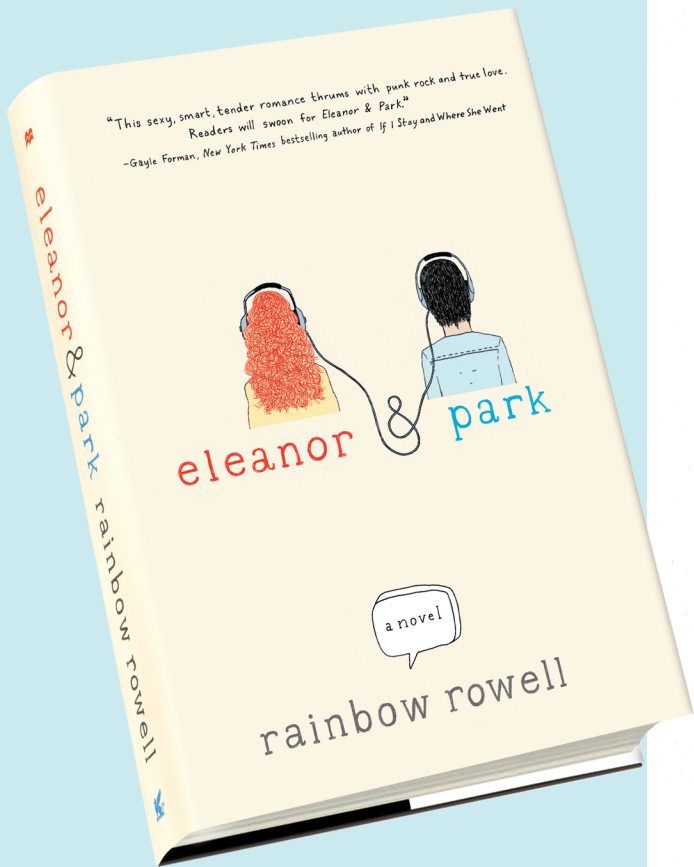
Every romance has its obstacle: I have another boyfriend; my parents say we can't; you're a vampire and I'm not; etc.

But the obstacle in "Eleanor & Park" is simply the world. The world cannot stomach a relationship between a good-looking Korean kid and Big Red. The world cannot allow Eleanor a boyfriend of any kind, because she's poor and fat and dresses funny. The world cannot allow Park a girlfriend because he likes wearing eyeliner, and everyone knows that's gay. The world is the obstacle, as it always is when you're 16 and truly in love. Park's parents — two of the best-drawn adults I can remember in a young adult novel — serve as evidence that sometimes love conquers the world, and Eleanor's family is a reminder that sometimes it doesn't. As for Eleanor and Park . . . well, I won't spoil it.

Early in the novel, Park's English teacher asks him why "Romeo and Juliet" has survived 400 years. With Eleanor looking on, Park says: "Because people want to remember what it's like to be young? And in love?" After a moment, he adds, "Is that right?"

It is. "Eleanor & Park" reminded me not just what it's like to be young and in love with a girl, but also what it's like to be young and in love with a book. □

John Green is the author of "The Fault in Our Stars," "Paper Towns," "Looking for Alaska" and "An Abundance of Katherines."



*There's bullying, salvation through music and comics, a mean stepparent.*