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YA Literature

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*A Northern Light* Book Review

*A Northern Light*, by Jennifer Donnelly, is a compelling historical fiction novel written about a girl, sixteen-year-old Mattie Gokey, who is caught in a murder case that eventually helps her discover herself. The novel was published in April of 2003 by Harcourt, and the book won the Printz Honor Award in 2004 as well as the Carnegie Medal in 2003. Donnelly's story focuses on the coming-of-age of a girl desperately trying to find the right place for herself in a world much bigger than herself.

The novel is centered in Herkimer County in the Adirondack Mountains in the state of New York during 1906. Donnelly builds the setting through vivid descriptions of nature, buildings, and other landscape features. The novel's in-depth imagery gives its reader a sense of truly being there, in the secluded wilderness, far from New York City or other major towns. The book follows the main character Mathilda "Mattie" Gokey, a smart, bookish girl who aspires to attend college in New York City. Throughout the book, she must navigate the trials of her life and the promises she made. She also attempts to figure out what happened to Grace Brown, a girl who came up dead in Big Moose Lake at the Glenmore Hotel, the place Mattie works in the summer. Brown had asked Mattie to burn a stack of letters, and, instead of doing as she was asked, Mattie digs deeper and tries to solve the mystery of the girl's untimely death. Aside from

solving this mystery, Mattie must also find a path for herself in the world, even if it means leaving her family behind and breaking a promise made to her recently deceased mother.

*A Northern Light* is unique in the way that the story is written. The chapters switch between the present and the past and the novel ends with the past finally lining up with the present. This style choice gives a sense of a bigger impact to the reader and allows them to understand the dynamics of all the events taking place; it also allows the reader to comprehend all of the events that led up to the pivot point of the novel. It provides insight and gives the novel depth. This writing style also conveys a sense of cause and effect and how every detail leads to a central, bigger picture in the grand scheme of life.

Donnelly does a fine job not only developing the setting but also developing the characters and applying them to the plot of the novel. While the story focuses on Mattie and her internal and external conflicts, there are a plethora of other characters that drive the plot and make an impact on the novel perceived as a whole. Weaver Smith, an African-American boy who is Mattie's best friend, pushes her to pursue her dreams in writing and attending college in New York City. Miss Wilcox, Mattie's teacher, also pushes Mattie to continue writing and encourages her that she had a real talent for it, insisting she ought to attend college in the city. Pa, Mattie's father, is adamant to make her stay and help with her younger sisters and the small family farm. Royal Loomis is another character who tries to convince Mattie to stay behind, and Mattie's mother--recently deceased--holds a weighty promise over Mattie that leaves her conflicted in if she should stay or go. Also, lest we forget the recently deceased Grace Brown, whose letters end up changing Mattie's perspective on the world around her. Each character, small or large, contributes to the plot and is in some way a deciding factor in Mattie's decisions

and her conflict. All of Donnelly's characters are well developed through personality and appearance. However, the author makes a compelling choice in how she conveys her characters, as some are defined by appearances whereas others are defined by their personalities and actions.

Donnelly has written several other historical fiction novels including, *These Shallow Graves* (2015), *Revolution* (2010), *The Tea Rose* (2002), *The Winter Rose* (2006), and *The Wild Rose* (2011). Her historical fiction novels are memorable and well-developed and *A Northern Light* is no exception. With vivid imagery, characters, and writing, *A Northern Light* is a notable book worthy of the praise it receives. Despite being historical fiction, its themes transcend generations and can be applied to anyone who is struggling to find their place in the world.

*A Northern Light* is an excellent novel choice for any young adult literature reader who is looking for a compelling tale that teaches young adults how to navigate the world around them and discover themselves, even when it feels like everyone is attempting to change them and the weight of the world is on their shoulders. Every reader can connect to Mattie Gokey because there's a piece of Mattie Gokey in everyone.