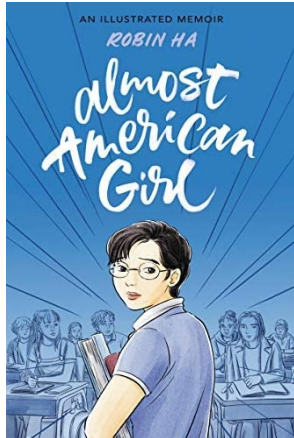


Finalist, High School Category



Essayist: Rayna, age 15, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology

Advocating for: *Almost American Girl* by Robin Ha

Every name tells a story. It's a story told with big block letters and a blue crayon, held tightly in a toddler's fist; a story told with even letters and a No.2 pencil, written from 9am to 3pm on weekdays; and a story told in looping letters and a fountain pen, the ink tracing out smooth loops on a crisp page. They all spell out a name, a story so powerful yet as delicate as a butterfly's wing. I have two names. "Rayna" is a story of an American teenager, weaved from mini American flags waved on the 4th of July, and late night McDonald burger runs. "Juha" is a lesser known story, a story of a rich Asian heritage, told in the silky waves of my native tongue and tasted in every home-cooked sujebi and songpyeon. But it's also a story of finding a sense of belonging, being "more American", and side-glances a heartbeat too long to be friendly. Names are pieces of ourselves, and "Almost American Girl" by Robin Ha is a beautiful reflection of that.

"Almost American Girl" by Robin Ha is the author's graphic memoir about immigrating to the U.S. The main character, Chuna, has her life torn before her eyes when her mom decides to move to Alabama to find their American dream and marry a man she met in Korea some time ago. As Chuna struggles to assimilate into a sometimes hostile environment, she learns to find where she belongs and her true definition of home. When I read this book, I immediately felt a deep connection because it reflected my own struggles to find my sense of self as a Korean-American. The part that really impacted me was when Chuna came to America and changed her name to "Robin". Both names are the two pieces of a puzzle of Chuna's life. Like me, one reflects her identity as a Korean, reminiscent of the whispers of a past life but still deeply rooted in culture. The other reflects her identity as a first-generation Korean-American, persevering through racism and struggles, but determined to call this new country home. Through this book, I felt seen. It showed me that though Korea will always be my



motherland, my homeland is America and nobody can ever take that away from me.

Graphic novels, especially those with characters of color, are books that are often overlooked and underrepresented in literature because of their illustrations. However, illustrations in graphic novels don't take away from the message of the author; they enhance it. "Almost American Girl" is a heartfelt memoir for anyone who feels like they're in two worlds, split in two parts and wondering where their place is in life. It's a window to the struggles and joys of immigrants in America and a mirror to some of our own experiences. Most of all, this book shows us that our stories told by our names, our different worlds, our tears, and our joy, is what makes us whole.