|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE:** Black Swan Green | **SUB TO:** |
| **WRITER:** Keven McAlester | **SUB BY:** |
| **GENRE:** Coming of Age Drama | **SUB ON:** |
| **PERIOD:** 1982-1983 | **READER:** Rebecca Ben-David |
| **SETTING:** Worcestershire, England | **DATE:** 10/4/16 |
| **FORM:** Book |  |

**LOGLINE:**

A self-conscious boy entering adolescence must learn to find strength in self-acceptance if he is to hold his own through the ups and downs of social hierarchy and his parents’ brewing divorce.

**MATERIAL:** Recommend

**WRITER:** Recommend

**BRIEF:** Set against the backdrop of the Falklands War, it seems there is no peace for schoolboy JASON TAYLOR (13). Torn between wanting to prove himself to his peers or stay in the shadows to save face, he volleys between tasting boyhood glory and choking under the pressure of the status quo as he simultaneously tries to make sense of girls and his parents’ deteriorating relationship. Through trial and error, Jason learns to navigate these spheres with more confidence, and ultimately discovers a path toward self-acceptance. Overall, the story appeals with classic bildungsroman charm, incorporating a vignette-style structure that maintains fluidity and humor throughout. The protagonist-as-narrator is effective and relatable, blending sincerity and cynicism to create an honest and immediate tone that matures naturally with the protagonist. While certain character dynamics could benefit from further development, strong characters and visuals provide a promising foundation for a fully realized piece.

**SYNOPSIS:**

It is January 1982, and in the midst of war in the Falklands and his parents’ brewing divorce, JASON TAYLOR is about to turn 13 and has more pressing concerns. First and foremost, surviving a new term at Up-On-Severns Comprehensive. Desperate to improve his popularity and keep his stammer a secret, he purposefully sabotages his academic image as he tries to hold his own against the brutality of his more popular peers, namely the ringleader NEAL BROSE (13). Jason’s best friend, DEAN “MORON” MORAN (13), provides little relief as it is also self-sabotage to associate with low rankers.

To distract himself from the tension at home and his confusing interest in tomboy DAWN MADDEN (14), Jason tries to up his game by hanging out with his cousin HUGO, who introduces him to cigarettes and prank techniques, and insists Jason has to kill his “Not today” attitude or he will become his father. Very much motivated by this, Jason makes an effort to overcome his stutter by practicing with Dawn Madden’s name. Soon after, he earns some real cred with her, Neal’s gang, and town legend TOM YEW (19) with a cherry knocking trick he picked up from Hugo.

The news spreads at school, and boosts Jason’s popularity. On the last day of the term, he gets an invitation to join the “secret society” Spooks, of which Tom, Neal and co. are a part. The day before his induction, Jason accidentally catches Tom and Dawn making out and then some. Worst feeling in the world. Jason just barely makes it through the literal trial run to get into Spooks, but he does it, he’s in - best feeling in the world. Now in with the popular crowd, Jason distances himself from Dean. He has more important things to worry about - flirting with girls over summer break, trying to repair his grandfather’s lucky watch that he wore to the Spooks induction and broke. In the meantime, his sister JULIA (18) is leaving for Scotland to start university, and his father is on thin ice at work. Jason visits his mother at her art gallery where they tag team to prevent a group of girls from nicking some of the merchandise. Impressed and happy, Jason risks holding his mother’s hand on the way to the movies - only for two boys in his class to recognize him.

The new school term begins, and so does Jason’s torture. Down to “maggot” from his original middle rank, his status seems tanked for good. With Tom Yew killed in action in the Falklands, the Spooks resort back to their old bullying ways, and invite the entire student body to join in. Entirely isolated and friendless, Jason watches his parents’ marriage fall apart in front of him, and lashes out at his speech therapist for all the suffering he’s endured, blaming his stutter - which everyone now knows about after an unfortunate incident in English class. Out of nowhere, Dean starts talking to Jason again, at first to tell him he has a sign on his back or that Dawn is pregnant with Tom’s child. Over time, they make good, and decide to go to the annual Goose Fair together where they are ambushed by Neal’s gang.

With Jason’s father fired from work and his parents’ divorce underway, it’s the end of the term, and Jason has had it. He busts up Neal’s calculator in front of his class, and when sent to the headmaster’s office, spills the beans on the gang’s operation. Neal and his henchman are expelled. Julia returns for Christmas break just in time for her parents to sell the house. She and Jason find comfort in each other, and decide to attend the Valentine’s Disco with Dean’s family. Having stood up to the school bullies, Jason earns the attention of one of his classmates, HOLLY DEBLIN (14), and has his first kiss. Accepting that the world doesn’t always have to make sense, Jason and Holly rejoin their classmates for a final sing-along to “Once in a Lifetime” by the Talking Heads.

**COMMENTS:**

*Black Swan Green* is ultimately a story about realizing one’s strength to let go of fear (of judgment, of the unknown, of one’s own potential) and finding hope in its place. It posits that gaining clarity as a young person does not demand relinquishing all innocence or that letting go of innocence means resigning oneself to bitterness. On the whole, it successfully communicates this message of hope and growth as an 80s coming-of-age piece for a modern day audience. At its core, it is nostalgic and poignant in the vain of *Billy Elliot* or *Sixteen Candles*, without the volume of angst in *Ordinary People*. The script has a relatively strong flow grounded by believable dialogue that adds humor and maintains engagement. While some scenes could be further tightened to create more space for other characters to shine, overall the script has solid appeal cross-culturally and from an intergenerational perspective, although it remains very Western-centric/WASPy.

The star of the script is the narration. The protagonist-as-narrator choice is particularly effective because it creates an environment where even as Jason himself struggles with self-doubt and shame, the narrative as a whole (distinct from individual characters within the story world) does not ultimately shame or punish him. Because the narration keeps us in the present moment, mirroring the mentality of a young teenager, it commands recognition of Jason’s character beat to beat in the context of his experiences. This strengthens emotional resonance scene-to-scene, and presents the audience with a meaningful, complex, and unapologetically genuine portrayal of the struggle for self-acceptance, playfully balanced in its innocence and cynicism.

The vignette structure works well in tandem with the narration style, giving pause between each formative moment as a complete thought that builds into the next, and creating an interesting measuring stick to track the evolution of Jason’s character. This setup makes the story more digestible for somewhat younger viewers, while also placing adult audiences very firmly at the center of a young teen’s mind, where impulse, dissonance, and fixation tend to run the show.

While the script does a great job exploring the complexities of masculinity, the treatment of its female characters could be improved. Jason’s relationship with his sister is by far the most developed male-female dynamic, and is well balanced, believable, and heartfelt. Her presence is strong and feels appropriately motivated throughout given her age difference to Jason. Aside from this, the remaining female characters feel a bit underutilized, particularly Jason’s mother, his first crush, and his eventual love interest. While it is understandable that these characters would be more peripheral to reflect Jason’s developing attitudes toward girls, the love interest character could easily enter the story as early as his first crush to ensure a more solid presence that builds throughout, as seen with his sister. Introducing the two as friends would demonstrate a complex, positive female relationship, validate different forms of gender presentation and Jason’s attraction to both, and parallel Jason’s struggles with sensitivity vs. emotional disconnect and other aspects of coded behavior that pepper the script.

*Black Swan Green* is a heartfelt, realistic, aptly titled drama that offers a little something for everyone - history, romance, comedy, tragedy/loss, finding your place or creating your own, etc. The main theme of learning to stand up for the voice you worked so hard to find (i.e. repressing/killing the part(s) of yourself you don’t like vs. learning to embrace them and advocate for yourself) is a struggle all movie-goers can identify with. The subtle way in which the script tackles gender conformity earns bonus points for social relevance, and helps update the tone without losing the sentimentality of the 80s bildungsroman. While the piece is semi-autobiographical and therefore implies a white male protagonist, there is technically no mention of ethnicity anywhere in the script. This leaves a great opportunity to potentially cast non-white leads, which may augment thematic depth (identity, patriotism, class/status) and elevate appeal through its diversity, particularly given the historical backdrop as well as trends in both British and American coming-of-age narratives often typified by white privilege. On the whole, *Black Swan Green* is an engaging, structurally sound, and emotionally satisfying piece that offers a more refreshing take on the coming-of-age drama.