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This is My America

By Kim Johnson

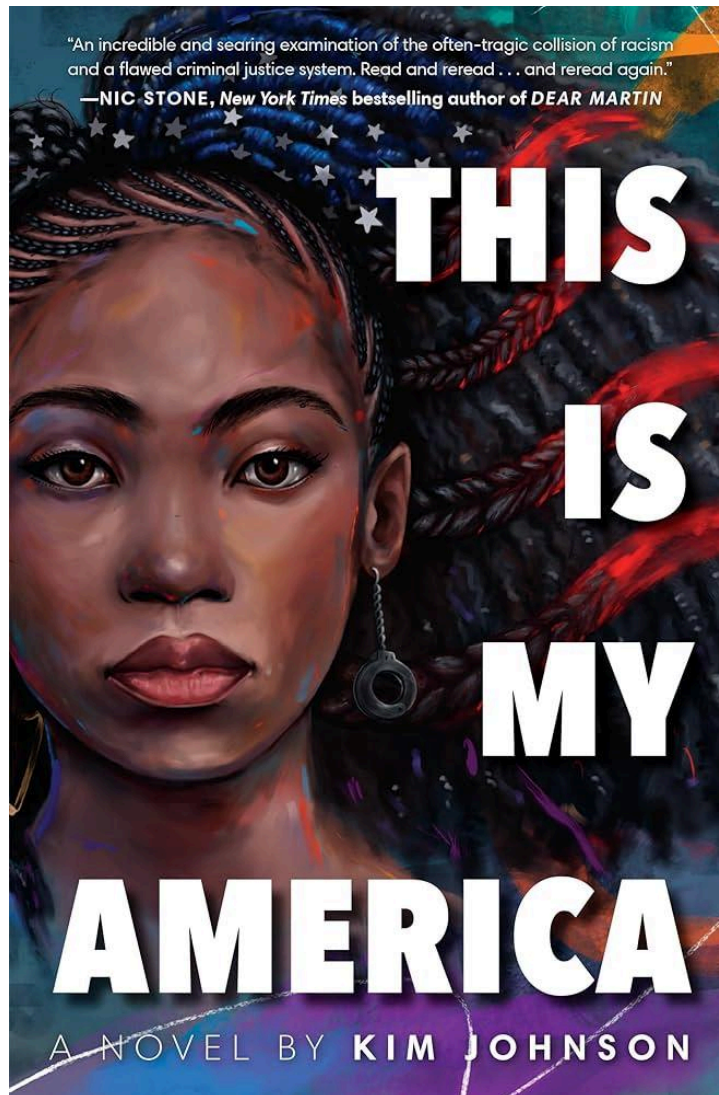


Image Source: <https://www.amazon.com/This-My-America-Kim-Johnson/dp/0593118766>



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About the Author

Kim Johnson's background in activism dates back to her teenage years, as she became involved in social justice organizations. This passion continues to grow during her college years and deeply influences her work as an author. Alongside her writing career, Johnson serves as a college administrator, remaining actively engaged in her community to further her mission of inspiring and driving meaningful change. She holds degrees from the University of Oregon, the University of Maryland, College Park, and an MFA from Oregon State University Cascades. Now based in the Washington, DC, area with her family, Johnson writes social thrillers rooted in real-world issues and inspired by current headlines. Her debut novel, *This Is My America*, garners numerous awards, including the Pacific Northwest Book Award and the Malka Penn Human Rights Award for Children's Literature. Following its success, Johnson publishes *Invisible Son* and *The Color of a Lie* in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

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Book Summary

This Is My America is set in the fictional neighborhood of Crowning Heights, a poor, rural community in Texas and follows Tracy Beaumont, a seventeen-year-old African American girl. Tracy tirelessly writes letters to Innocence X, a justice organization, pleading for them to get her father's case reopened and help prove his innocence as his execution date looms just nine months away. Tracy's father, convicted of a double murder he insists he did not commit, has spent seven years on death row, which has deeply impacted the Beaumont family, especially Tracy's brother Jamal and her younger sister Corinne. Just as Tracy's determination seems unshakable, a new tragedy strikes: Jamal is accused of murdering a white girl. Tracy's world spirals as she confronts the trauma her family has endured and the failures of the justice system, where, for some, they are guilty until proven innocent. The story focuses on Tracy's investigation as she searches for answers to save her family, unearthing hidden secrets in their small Texas town that may prove dangerous for her.

Book Quotes

Quote #1 (Page 56)

"Corinne never held that memory, but I know she feels it in everything we breathe. It's in the polite nods across the street we have to make, the way our family turns down our music when there are others around. Say yes ma'am and no sir. Leave our jackets and backpacks in the car when we go shopping."

Analysis and Importance

This quote is significant for two key reasons: it illustrates the transmission of systemic racism's effects across generations and highlights how these effects shape the everyday

actions and behaviors of Black families. Corinne, Tracy's younger sister, is born after their father's imprisonment. Unlike Tracy and Jamal, who witness their father being violently taken by the police and endure the trauma of the highly publicized trial, Corinne grows up in the aftermath of these events. Her knowledge of her father and the injustice surrounding his incarceration comes only through family stories and the occasional prison visits. However, despite not witnessing these events firsthand, she is acutely aware of the injustice embedded in her father's absence. Corinne carries the burden of a family fractured by systemic racism, recognizing from an early age that her father's imprisonment is not just a personal tragedy but a representation of a much larger societal failure. This understanding is evident when Tracy reflects, "she feels it in everything we breathe," emphasizing how deeply ingrained this injustice is in their daily lives, which passes down in seemingly mundane situations. This is the heightened sense of vigilance, a form of learned alertness, manifesting in actions like nodding politely to neighbors, keeping their music at low volumes, and using deferential language like "yes ma'am" and "no sir." These behaviors are survival strategies crafted over time to navigate a world where Black bodies are constantly scrutinized and judged. They serve as protective measures aimed at minimizing confrontation and avoiding potential discrimination or violence.

A powerful example of this racial vigilance is the family's habit of leaving jackets and backpacks in the car when shopping, a precaution to avoid being seen as suspicious. This reflects the broader issue of racial profiling, where Black people are often presumed guilty before any evidence or action has occurred. This is mirrored in how Jamal is written off as guilty by most of the community before he even has the chance to defend himself. The subtlety of these daily actions highlights how systemic racism often operates not through overt aggression but through the pressure placed on marginalized communities to make

themselves less visible and less threatening, even when they are simply existing. The quote serves as a reminder that racism often manifests in the smallest, most routine aspects of life and that the trauma and awareness of systemic oppression are passed down even to those who do not directly experience the initial moments of injustice, shaping the choices and behaviors of those who live under its shadow.

Quote #2 (Page 68-69)

I'm jarred into reality when Jamal's picture flashes on the screen. The word suspect stamped under his name. They didn't use his footage from her show last week. Not his homecoming picture, a school photo, or a picture from the countless track meets and fund-raising banquet dinners. Instead, they use a photo of Jamal with a red cup in his hand, middle finger up, a big grin on his face. I remember it from his Instagram. They have it cropped close around him, but if you saw the rest of the photo, you'd see the entire track team. A unity shot of everyone flipping off Coach Curry for scheduling an early-morning run the day after homecoming.

They've got Jamal painted like a *thug*, standing between two other Black team members with blurred-out headshots, Dean and the other white teammates conveniently cropped out of the original photo. All Jamal was doing was being a teenager at a party, no harm. He was the designated driver that night, but the red cup sticks out. Now it don't matter he was hydrating with water before the early-morning run.

Analysis and Importance

The importance of this scene lies in the media's powerful role in shaping public perception, particularly concerning the criminal justice system. Instead of celebrating Jamal's personal accomplishments, such as his track meet performances or participation in school activities, the media focuses on a single image taken out of context. This image, capturing the entire track team in a lighthearted moment of teenagers being teenagers, is cropped to exclude all the white athletes, leaving only Jamal and his two Black teammates visible. This selective framing intentionally perpetuates harmful stereotypes that portray young Black men as dangerous or irresponsible.

This visual manipulation not only distorts the truth but also reinforces entrenched racial biases. When the media labels Jamal a "suspect," it taps into racially charged language historically used to criminalize Black individuals. This portrayal primes the public to view Jamal through a lens of suspicion rather than humanity. Depicting Jamal as a "thug" instead of a typical teenager reflects a broader societal issue in which Black youth are rarely afforded the benefit of the doubt. Even innocent or harmless behavior is scrutinized and misinterpreted through a racialized lens, presuming guilt before innocence is considered. By engaging in selective editing and using racially coded language, the media constructs a narrative that fits pre-existing stereotypes of criminality. This not only influences public opinion but also impacts how Jamal may be perceived in the legal system. When Jamal stands trial, the jury, likely composed of individuals already exposed to these biased portrayals, may harbor unconscious biases that lead them to presume his guilt before hearing the case's facts. This media distortion mirrors the systemic injustices Black communities face, where guilt is often presumed based on racial identity alone.

Quote #3 (Page 282)

"I'm nervous. My heart is sinking. Judge Vandyne has the same expression Judge Williams had years ago when he confirmed what the jury's decision would mean for Daddy. Death. His matter-of-fact demeanor always rubbed me the wrong way. He thought he was being just, but what I've learned is you can't separate humanity from the legal system."

Analysis and Importance

In this critical scene from *This Is My America*, Tracy witnesses Judge Vandyne during a key moment in her father's appeal. She recalls the cold and detached demeanor of the judge who first sentences her father to death. This recognition underscores her deepening awareness that while the legal system strives to embody justice, it often lacks the compassion necessary to fully consider the people whose lives it impacts. Tracy observes that these judges, with their "matter-of-fact demeanor," act in accordance with the law, but their rigid adherence to procedure reveals a troubling disconnect from the humanity of those they judge. Throughout the novel, the justice system is portrayed as an institution more concerned with upholding process than addressing the needs of the people it affects, particularly in the case of Tracy's father. His life is decided in a manner so detached from the personal cost that it neglects the devastation wrought on his entire family, not just on him. This scene is especially poignant for Tracy, as it brings to light the systemic failures that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. For them, the legal system often ignores the complex social and personal contexts behind not just the crime but also the sentencing and the appeal, resulting in unfair trials and biased outcomes. Tracy realizes that "you can't separate humanity from the legal system," a crucial understanding that, while the system claims to operate under ideals of

objectivity and equality, principles enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of "equal protection of the laws," it is, in reality, shaped by the subjective experiences, biases, and limitations of those within it. The all-white jury that convicts her father highlights the racial dynamics at play, reinforcing how societal privileges allow some to navigate the system more easily while marginalized groups, like Tracy's family, remain vulnerable to its inherent biases.

This quote also resonates with Tracy's childhood misunderstanding of the legal system. When her father is first accused, she naively equates the courtroom to church, a place where truth and redemption are revered. She imagines the judge as a moral figure akin to a pastor, guided by a higher sense of justice and morality. Tracy anticipates a moment of revelation where the judge will see the truth of her father's innocence and reverse the charges. However, the reality she confronts is far different. Unlike the church, the courtroom is a cold, procedural space devoid of the empathy she had hoped for, ultimately showing Tracy that the justice system is not a place for personal redemption or burning truth but rather a mechanism too often shaped by inequality and bias.

Classroom Use & Why Teens Should Read It

For classroom instruction, this novel is best suited for high school students. Nonetheless, with careful preparation, it can be effectively taught at the middle school level if students are provided with appropriate background knowledge and guided through structured discussions. This ensures they can engage with mature themes, such as the criminal justice system, police violence, systemic racism, and death, with a level of maturity and understanding. The relevance of these topics to real-world issues makes the novel particularly meaningful for teenagers, as they are beginning to grapple with complex social realities and form their own views on society.

The novel also serves as a powerful springboard for exploring critical concepts like privilege, race, and civic responsibility, as it centers youth activism in a way that empowers students to see their potential for enacting change in their own communities, inspiring them to make a difference. As a classroom activity, I would recreate Tracy's "Know Your Right Workshop," where students engage in an interactive and informative session about legal rights, police encounters, and the justice system. Like in Tracy's Workshop, I have students practice their interaction with law enforcement in potentially high-stakes situations such as traffic stops or if the police come to their door with a search warrant, or even when being arrested, which not only builds their confidence in applying them practically but also encourages them to reflect on their own privileges and biases. I believe this activity is an effective way for students to discuss their perspectives, learn from one another, and connect with the book's themes.

**How it fits best in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*:
“Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences”:**

- The novel delves into systemic racism, particularly how it impacts African Americans in the criminal justice system. Tracy's father is wrongfully convicted and placed on death row, highlighting issues of racial discrimination and wrongful convictions.
- The novel portrays the immense pressure on Tracy as she navigates her family's struggle to free her father while maintaining normalcy. This reflects real-life experiences of families torn apart by imprisonment and legal battles.
- Tracy's brother Jamal faces accusations of murder, bringing to light the societal violence and prejudices that young African American men endure. These themes resonate with real-world discussions on how African American youths are often presumed guilty without proper evidence.
- The protagonist, Tracy, takes on the role of an advocate, working to prove her father's innocence by reaching out to organizations like Innocence X. Her activism mirrors

real-life youth engagement in social justice movements, particularly regarding racial equality and judicial reform.

“Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss”:

- The novel deals with the profound emotional struggle faced by Tracy, whose father is on death row. The looming execution date evokes feelings of grief and anticipatory loss, which is a core aspect of books in this category.
- Similar to other books about death and loss, *This is My America* showcases how Tracy's family copes with the death sentence. The emotional and mental toll of having a family member on death row mirrors themes in other works that deal with terminal illness or sudden loss.
- Much like the reflection on human suffering and the meaning of life in *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, this novel touches on larger systemic issues like judicial errors and the death penalty, emphasizing how society fails certain individuals, especially Black Americans.
- The novel, while grappling with death, also focuses on the pursuit of justice and the hope of exoneration. This aligns with other books in this category that offer characters a chance at redemption or coming to terms with loss, sometimes in unexpected ways.
- Like books such as *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which offer profound emotional lessons about life and death, *This is My America* provides a cathartic journey for both Tracy and readers as she struggles to save her father's life while dealing with complex familial and societal dynamics.

“Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”:

- The novel powerfully highlights the racial injustice that Black families, especially those from underserved communities, face in the criminal justice system. Tracy's father, a Black man, is wrongly convicted and sentenced to death, and her brother faces wrongful

accusations, exposing how racial profiling and systemic bias play a role in the lives of Black Americans.

- Tracy's family grapples with the emotional and practical challenges of having a father on death row, showing the strain that the prison system places on families. Tracy's determination to prove her father's innocence reflects the emotional burden young people bear when their families are torn apart by incarceration.
- Tracy embodies youth activism by persistently writing to Innocence X, a justice-seeking organization, to appeal her father's conviction. Her advocacy for her family mirrors real-life efforts by young activists working to bring attention to unjust legal cases.
- The novel explores how Tracy navigates her identity as a young Black woman and a daughter fighting for her father's life. It also examines the complex decisions she must make about balancing personal desires with familial responsibilities, highlighting the theme of self-awareness and moral responsibility.

“Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival”:

- The novel depicts the tireless efforts of Tracy Beaumont, a teenage girl, to prove her father's innocence and seek justice in a system that disproportionately targets Black men. Her unwavering determination to battle systemic racism and mass incarceration showcases personal courage and resilience.
- Tracy's journey highlights the survival of her family against overwhelming societal challenges, particularly racial prejudice. The story captures the struggles of navigating a world where being Black means facing heightened risks of wrongful accusation and police brutality.
- The book reflects the generational impact of mass incarceration on Black families, emphasizing how the Beaumonts must navigate both the immediate survival from daily prejudice and the longer-term effects of trauma. This demonstrates how survival extends beyond physical endurance to include emotional resilience.

- Although the story does not promise an immediate resolution to the systemic issues, it leaves readers with hope, underlining how survival is not only about overcoming present challenges but also maintaining the courage to continue fighting for a better future.

“Chapter 8: Books on Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable”:

- The story functions as an allegory for the broken U.S. justice system, especially as it relates to marginalized communities. The fight for Tracy's father's exoneration symbolizes the broader struggles for racial justice, echoing themes found in classic allegories that critique societal structures.
- Tracy's determination to save her father and later her brother from wrongful accusations invokes a mythic hero's journey. Like traditional heroes, she faces systemic obstacles and personal sacrifices, embodying the courage and resilience often seen in parables about justice and redemption.
- The contrast between hope (as Tracy works to uncover the truth) and despair (as her father nears execution) creates a thematic parallel to myths where light and darkness, life and death, constantly clash, providing deeper moral exploration through these opposites.

Text Complexity

Quantitative

Lexile: HL640L

ATOS:

- Book Level: 4.3
- Interest Level: Upper Grades (UG 9-12)
- AR Points: 12.0
- Word Count: 81618

Dale-Chall:

- Raw Score: 3
- Adjusted Score: $3.6365 + 3 = 6.81$
- Grade Level: 7-8
- Age Range: 12-13

New Dale-Chall:

- Score: 41.7
- Grade Level: 5-6
- Age Range: 10-11

Flesch-Kincaid:

- Score: 85 (fairly easy to read)

Qualitative

Language

- Johnson's prose is clear and direct, but not simplistic. The language is accessible, making it suitable for a broad audience, including younger readers, while still embedding moments of intense emotional and intellectual engagement. The dialogue is authentic and mirrors the lived experiences of marginalized communities, incorporating both African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and formal, polished language. This blending of styles reflects the duality of the protagonist's life, navigating personal experiences while engaging with formal systems like the law and journalism.

Structure

- The novel follows a largely linear progression but interspersed elements of flashback and reflection. This structural choice adds depth to the protagonist's journey as she grapples with her father's impending execution. The use of a first-person narrative enhances intimacy and allows readers to access the protagonist's internal struggle, giving insight into her feelings of helplessness, determination, and hope. Additionally, the novel occasionally shifts tone between suspense (regarding the brother's situation) and emotional introspection (concerning family dynamics), creating a multifaceted narrative flow that requires readers to navigate complex shifts in mood.

Knowledge Demands

- The novel demands a reasonable amount of contextual knowledge regarding the U.S. criminal justice system, systemic racial injustice, and contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter. Readers unfamiliar with these concepts may find the material challenging without supplemental guidance, but Johnson embeds enough exposition to make the text understandable without prior in-depth knowledge. The novel also requires some understanding of family dynamics in communities of color, where socioeconomic struggles are common, and family members often take on protective or justice-seeking roles. While accessible, the depth of thematic content encourages readers to engage critically with the broader socio-political issues presented.

Level of Meaning

- Beneath this surface narrative, *This is My America* explores much broader themes related to systemic racism, the criminal justice system, and the persistent inequalities faced by African American families. Tracy's personal struggle is symbolic of the larger racial injustices that disproportionately affect Black individuals in the United States, particularly in the legal system. The novel raises critical questions about the efficacy of

the justice system, the impact of wrongful convictions on families, and the social implications of mass incarceration. Tracy's father's wrongful conviction, along with her brother's unjust accusation, is reflective of real-world cases that are deeply entwined with racial profiling, legal biases, and the socioeconomic disparities that prevent marginalized communities from accessing fair legal representation.

Comparison

- Compared to other works within the young adult fiction genre that address similar themes of social justice, *This is My America* shares much with novels like *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. Both works tackle themes of racism and the justice system, and both use first-person narratives to pull readers directly into the emotional and intellectual worlds of their protagonists. However, while *The Hate U Give* focuses more on immediate reactions to a police shooting, *This is My America* takes a broader view of systemic injustice by exploring both past and present, weaving in personal and legal battles, and emphasizing the long-term consequences of systemic failures.