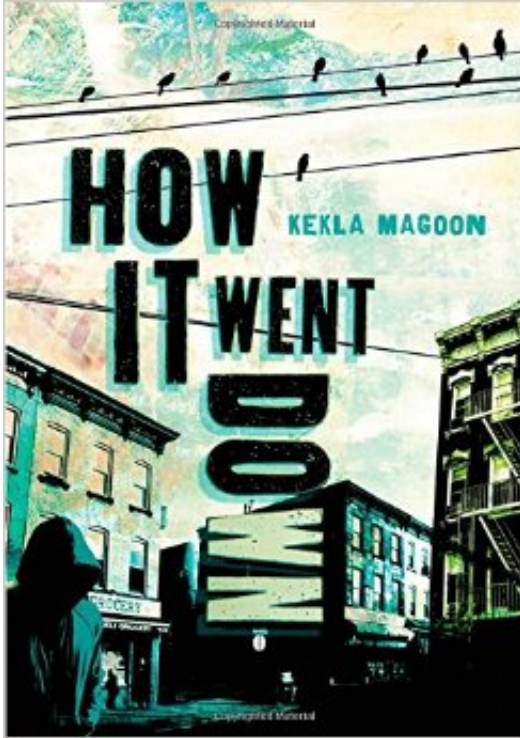


Review: How It Went Down by Kekla Magoon



A black boy in a hoodie is gunned down in front of a convenience store by a white assailant. The shooter is allowed to walk free on dubious claims of self-defense. Immediately, the story becomes national news, and no two reports can agree on the details: Did he rob the store? Was he armed? Was he a gang member? Was the shooting racially motivated? In the Coretta Scott King Award-winning novel [How It Went Down](#), Kekla Magoon takes a realistic, brutally honest approach to one of the most controversial issues in America today.

How It Went Down revolves around the shooting death of 16-year-old Tariq Johnson and how it affects his community, the predominately black neighborhood of Underhill. We learn about Tariq's life and personality through the eyes of his mother, grandmother, developmentally disabled younger sister, and various friends and acquaintances. It quickly becomes obvious that the characters' perceptions of the shooting are colored by their widely varying perceptions of Tariq himself, making it impossible to tell which account of the crime, if any, is the true one.

The book features a whopping 18 first-person perspectives, emphasizing how no two people have the same view of events. Most of the viewpoint characters are well developed and have distinct voices, perhaps the most memorable being Tariq's sister, Tina. Tina comes across as convincingly childlike, but in some ways more perceptive than the older characters. Magoon uses brief yet

poignant sentences to convey Tina's emotional reactions:

I pick up the book called *Helpful People*.

I like this book, especially the pictures.

And how Tariq always does funny voices when he reads it....

Page four says

Policemen solve problems and help keep you safe.

I tear out page four and crumple it into a ball.

With so many viewpoint characters, however, some of them inevitably get skimmed on character development, such as Melody, a girl whose first kiss happened to be with Tariq, and Rosalita, a Hispanic woman old enough to remember when Tariq's grandmother was born. I felt the chapters concerning these characters could easily have been cut without hurting the story.

Magoon provides few definitive answers regarding the details of Tariq's death, but this feels very appropriate. The message seems to be that whatever Tariq's flaws as a person, his death was a tragedy, thus, the details aren't important. This is reinforced when even the characters who weren't particularly fond of him, like the girl he used to bully for being overweight and the rich man who disapproves of his stepson associating with people from the "hood," ultimately join the rest of the community in showing solidarity.

How It Went Down is clearly meant for a younger audience. Most of the viewpoint characters are teenagers, and their voices and experiences feel very authentic. But I would recommend this book to readers of any age. It's an intense, riveting page-turner that encourages critical discussion on issues facing black Americans and the ways they're distorted by the media.

Rating: 4 out of 5 stars