

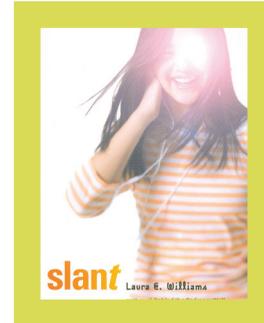
# Book Review

## **Slant**

**By Laura Williams**

**Publisher: Milkweed Editions, 2008**

**Reviewed by Alison Seevak**



I had high hopes for *Slant*, Laura E. Williams's "tween" novel about one Korean adoptee's exploration of blepharoplasty, the cosmetic surgery used by some Asians to deepen their eyelid creases and give their eyes a more rounded "Western" look. As the white mother of a six-year-old girl adopted from China, I am always looking for books that might one day provide my daughter with good role models, and give us both insight into racism that I've never experienced myself. While *Slant* tackles a complicated issue with honesty and even great humor, it ultimately let me down.

*Slant* tells the story of thirteen-year-old Lauren Wallace, a Korean adoptee who is the only Asian-American in her suburban Connecticut middle school. Taunted by a pair of classmates who call her "gook," "chink," and "slant," Lauren is saving her money to pay for eye surgery.

Written for nine- to thirteen-year-old readers, *Slant* revolves around Lauren's struggle—will she or won't she have the surgery that she believes will solve her problems? Along the way, we meet Lauren's family and friends: her tall, blonde best friend Julie; her little sister Maya, a Chinese adoptee; her widowed father, a white college professor who speaks like one of the Shakespearean characters he studies; and Sean, the red-headed jock she hopes will ask her to the Fall Frolic.

Anyone who has been thirteen will relate to Lauren's everyday problems and concerns. During the course of the novel, she gets her ears pierced, buys her first bra, argues with her emotionally distant father, and longs to be asked to the school dance.

But Lauren is also dealing with the isolation that many transracial adoptees face, especially those raised in all-white communities. Williams is a Korean adoptee herself and it's clear that this is territory she knows. "Personally, I don't remember much from kindergarten, but I do remember one thing. I remember being different. I was the only Korean. The only one with slanty eyes and hair as black as a crow's wing," Lauren says. Except for her younger sister and the Korean-American surgeon with whom she consults about the surgery, there are no Asians in her life.

A middle-schooler who recently read *Slant* told me that Lauren felt real to her because "like many girls in the world, she was unhappy

about her body." No matter what her age, what woman doesn't want to change something about her body? But Lauren's interest in eye surgery goes beyond unhappiness with her looks. The racist taunting that she experiences is relentless. "So, *Slant*, did you do your math homework?," the boys demand. Or they pull their eyes back into narrow slits when she walks down the halls of her middle school.

Ultimately, Lauren does decide against the eye surgery. In a somewhat melodramatic fashion, she comes to this decision after learning that her adoptive mother's death was a suicide, not an accident as she'd always believed. She also discovers that her mother had a nose job at thirteen, and that the plastic surgery never made her any happier. Lauren realizes that her eyes may be "different" from those around her, but she's a "happy person" and that this is what matters. I couldn't help but feel that Williams's decision to draw a parallel between the nose job and the eye surgery—and to make it the turning point of the book—diminishes the racism Lauren experiences.

In the book's final pages, Lauren stands up to her tormenters. And she seems ready to give Sean, the object of her affection, a piece of her mind, too. He's stood by, a silent witness, as his friends have taunted Lauren. At one point, he even calls her "Slant." But just a few paragraphs after Lauren confronts the boys, Sean approaches and asks her to the Fall Frolic. Every intention Lauren had of talking to him about his behavior melts away. She's thrilled to be going to the dance and relieved when he calls her by her actual name.

I commend Williams for dealing with difficult issues in *Slant*. I hope that more "tween" novels will take on transracial adoption, racism, and belonging. And I hope that many of these novels will be written by adult transracial adoptees who have lived the experience. But I wish Williams had created a character who developed more self-awareness about her situation during the course of the book. I wish Lauren had been able to stand up for herself. While I was reading *Slant*, I asked a friend's daughter, a twelve-year-old Chinese-American girl, if she'd like to borrow the book after I'd finished reading it. "No," she said, after looking it over. "I think it will be too sad." I'd have to agree.

*Alison Seevak, a teacher and writer, lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her daughter Anna, who was adopted from China.*