

Young adult romance seeks illumination in dark times

In her latest book, “Lovely, Dark, and Deep,” Seattle author Justina Chen throws together an unlikely combination of ingredients to spice up the tried-and-true Young Adult romance formula of girl-meets-boy, etcetera.

Chen’s recipe includes solar urticaria (more on that in a minute), gastrodiplomacy (you’ll have to read the book for that), parents who run a crisis management firm, a widowed aunt who runs her own garage, a new superhero and radiant meteor showers.

She inserts playlists with songs ranging from The Velvet Underground to Ed Sheeran.

And she provides a smorgasbord of food throughout the book: red bean baos, Hawaiian poke, pecan-cinnamon elephant ear cookies and caramel rum banana bread pudding, for starters.

As for the girl and the boy?

Viola Li has just returned from a trip to Africa with her aunt and is about to begin her senior year of high school when she succumbs to the swift and severe onset of solar urticaria, a rare condition also known as sun allergy.

Inconveniently, she collapses at Seattle’s Bumbershoot Festival where she has just set up a bake sale to benefit one of her many social justice causes.

On the plus side, she faints onto a stranger, her first customer of the day — a “broad-shouldered, ridiculously blond, young Thor-gone-lumberman in jeans and flannel shirt.”



Author Justina Chen

Josh is an aspiring comic book artist who has developed a new bikini-clad heroine, “Persephone from Planet X.”

He also has a highly developed sense of responsibility. When Viola comes out of the emergency room at the hospital, she finds him waiting to make sure she’s all right.

In fact, she isn’t. Viola’s case is severe enough to warrant no-holds-barred protection from the sun and other light sources. Her parents — who are crisis management professionals, remember — load her up with high SPF sunscreen, specially treated clothing and a super-sized hat. They change out the light bulbs at home and put film on all the windows to screen out UVA rays. When that isn’t enough, they remodel the basement into a perpetually dark bedroom where she can take refuge.

And when it becomes clear that her school cannot accommodate her condition,

“Lovely, Dark, and Deep”
By Justina Chen
Arthur A. Levine Books
352 pp
\$18.99

they homeschool her.

All of this drastically interferes with Viola’s expansive dreams for life beyond high school.

One saving grace is the relationship that grows between her and Josh. Early on, when she criticizes the scanty clothing of the female superhero Josh is developing, he invites Viola to work with him to improve the project. Friendship blossoms into something more, but not without bumps along the way. Josh

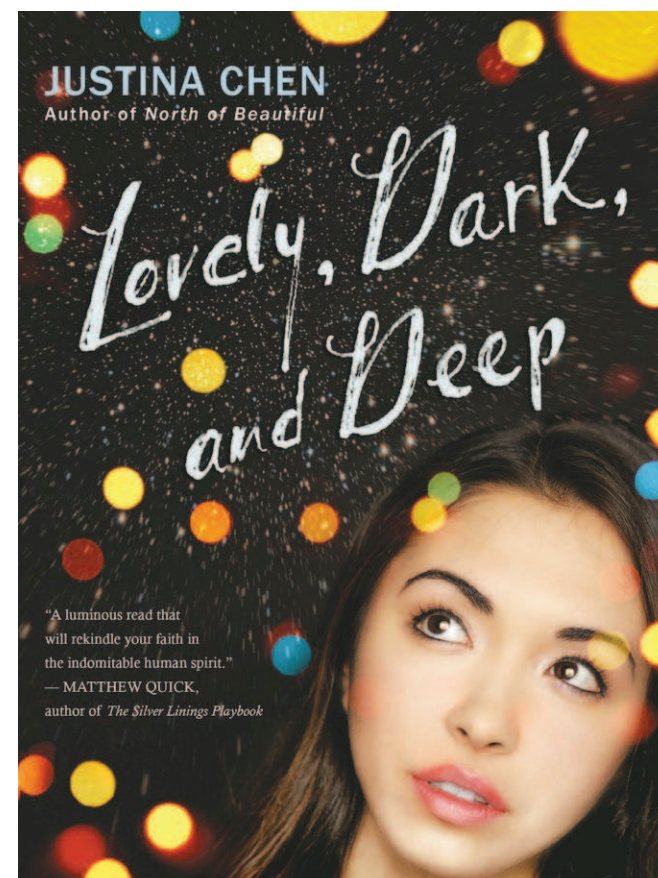
is struggling with some demons of his own.

Chen has created smart, articulate characters, and she loops in teen social norms that seem right up to date.

The plot does include one key coincidence that seems unlikely.

But overall, “Lovely, Dark, and Deep” is generously infused with details — whether about Viola’s condition or crisis management or the fascinating properties of light — that illuminate how to persevere even in the darkest of times.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.

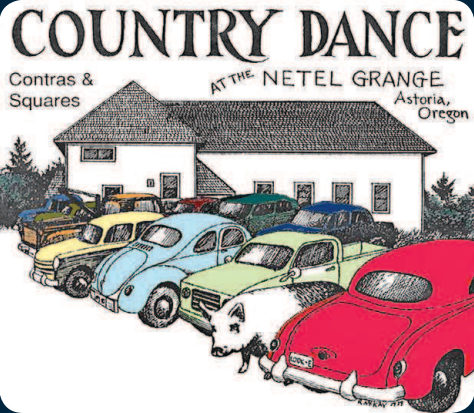


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The cover of Justina Chen’s “Lovely, Dark, and Deep.”



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