

YA novel confronts what homelessness feels like

‘Sleeping in My Jeans’ gives voice to a harrowing reality

Connie King Leonard tackles the unforgiving realities of poverty and homelessness in her new book, “Sleeping in My Jeans.” Classified as a young adult novel, this book is written in first person. Readers will feel the experiences of 16-year-old Mattie with a terrifying urgency.

The story is set in Eugene. Mattie, her 6-year-old half-sister Meg, and their mom have been staying at her mom’s boyfriend’s apartment. They’ve been there two years, but it’s always been a tenuous situation — the boyfriend drinks too much, and when he drinks, he gets mean.

By Chapter Two, he crosses a line when he comes home drunk one night, roughs up their mom, and even pushes Mattie and Meg around.

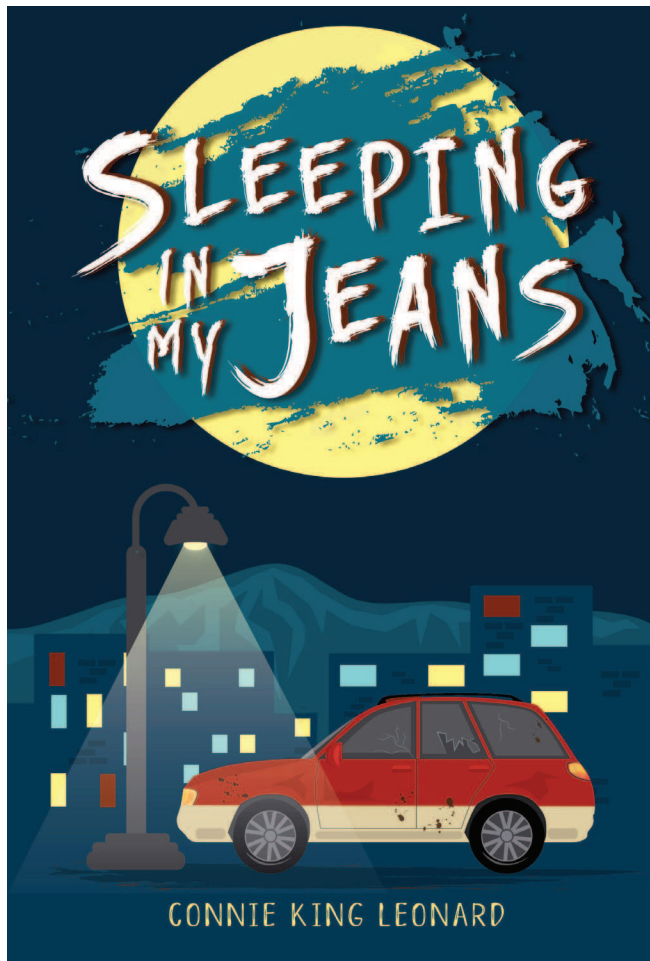
The three of them flee in Mom’s rust-bucket of a car, but they have nowhere to go.

Mom has been taking classes at the community college and although she’s been working two minimum wage jobs, she doesn’t have the savings to pay the deposit required for renting an apartment. But, as the product of the foster care system herself, she is determined not to break her family up.

So they sleep in the car.

By day, they go to work and school, where Mattie worries about keeping her grades up and her homelessness a secret.

“By high school, we



Ooligan Press

The cover of Connie King Leonard’s ‘Sleeping in My Jeans.’

should be beyond all the hateful garbage kids throw at each other, but I know better. Bad things still happen to people that are poor or different or don’t fit in with the rest of the crowd.”

In late afternoons and evenings, the girls take advantage of the warmth and safety of the library until their mom picks them up after she gets off work and then they drive around searching for a safe place to park, eat peanut butter sandwiches for supper, and try to get some sleep.

Sometimes they encounter other homeless people, who have staked out their own territories and don’t welcome others encroach-

ing on their space.

They also have to deal with the cops who come around. The officers aren’t well-equipped to help homeless folks get off the streets, but they do warn about people who might try to prey upon them.

Eventually, those dire predictions come true. In a harrowing chain of events, their car is attacked while they are sleeping inside it and they’re chased by some malevolent men. They escape, but the next day, when their mom goes to get the car repaired, she doesn’t return.

Mattie has zero resources — including money — at her disposal.

THIS WEEK’S BOOK

Sleeping in My Jeans

By Connie King Leonard

Ooligan Press

244 pp

\$16

She doesn’t trust anyone. But with her little sister in tow, she tries to figure out how to find their mom.

The author, who lives just south of Portland, has taught in both elementary and middle schools. She has seen the toll that homelessness takes on students — Oregon ranks first in the nation for the rate of homeless children and youth.

“Sleeping in My Jeans” gives voice to that reality, when too often our inclination might be to look the other way.

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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Crossword Answers

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