*Around Harvard Square*, by CJ Farley reviewed by Paige Bullock

Akashic Books

CJ Farley, a Harvard graduate as well as weathered author and journalist, has published four books, all of which open a discussion of racism and classism. *Around Harvard Square* is his latest, a quirky, social narrative Young Adult fiction novel that focuses on the institutional racism held in campuses across America.

The story is told through the point of view of Tosh Livingston, an 18-year-old ex-high school basketball star joining the Harvard freshmen class during the early 1990s. From a poor background, he can feel the class divide as soon as he steps onto campus. On his first day, Tosh is beaten at basketball by what he calls benchwarmers, gets his belongings trashed, and is introduced to *Harpoon,* a satirical magazine that pranks and strikes controversy. Tosh befriends two international students, Lao and Meera, and gets inspired to get more involved on campus. Meera and Lao peer-pressure him into crashing exclusive parties, competing for the *Harpoon,* and uncovering secrets within the institution. Their guide to these secrets is a Jamaican girl, Zippa, who was first rejected by Harvard but then saved by Hyacinth Bell, a pot smoking philosophy professor otherwise known as “The Chair.”

The three uncover the author of the infamous book *Around Harvard Square* which is this book’s namesake, secret societies, take on the university’s archaic values, and challenge white students’ “Lol we’re not racist” attitude towards minority students. The book spans through Tosh’s entire freshman year, and the humorous instances that take place on campus in search for the hard earned laugh.

Though the social commentary is a big part of the story, the conflicts are just as significant and impactful. The fall of Tosh’s athletic career and his injury cause him to be more nervous about the possibility being recognized; it also makes him more passive towards racism he experiences. Intermittently, Tosh talks to his family, and we learn more about his home life, such as that his father has increasing memory problems, so bad that he barely remembers that Tosh has left home for college, alongside with diabetes. In one of the calls back home we see that his father’s checks are bouncing, and Tosh cannot trace where his father’s money has gone. Tosh’s sister meanwhile feels indifferent about her father’s deteriorating state and is bitter about Tosh’s successes, which just adds to the tension.

The characters are widely diverse both in personality and ethnicity. Tosh, Lao, and Meera bring out the eccentric and satirical aspect of the novel. Tosh, sarcastic and observant, suffers from too many internal conflicts about his place at Harvard and his response to the racism. Lao, a comical character, is very standoffish to everyone except to an exclusive few and is also obsessed with robots taking over the world and his father’s marijuana business. Meera is the most outspoken and yet the shyest in the group. She is a woman of very few words but when she speaks, it is with intent and carefully placed rhetoric. She is the knowledgeable one of the group, she keeps them focused.

Tonally, there are multiple instances where the class divide is stark. Upon his arrival, Tosh senses the grandeur of the campus and feels out of place : “You might have seen me first, dragging a green garbage bag with all my stuff across the green sea of the Yard, through the froth of freshmen, in front of the classical columns of Widener Library”(10). The juxtaposition of a student walking across the Yard in a place of such grandiose carrying a trash bag makes for a startling image between poverty and wealth. Even the things some people say in the novel makes for both a comical but alarming statements. On the way to do a prank for the *Harpoon*, the ‘compers’ (people trying out) start to discuss how college admission is about who you know, not what you know: when one character observers that “[it’s] a rigged game—it’s more about money, family, and geography than merit,” another disagrees: “That is such bullshit,’ Spectrum snorted. ‘My parents spent shitloads on my college- prep courses and I earned my scores.”

*Around Harvard Square* brings social commentary to college life, approaching the issues in a humorous attitude. Tosh, Lao and Meera have an eventful freshman year from questioning life philosophies to debunking authors. Farley makes the injustices more tangible to a younger audience who may be future students at such institutions, and he shows how little progression has been made in the educational system regarding institutional racism.