

## The Office of Mercy

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*The Office of Mercy* by Ariel Djanikian is a dark and incredibly striking journey through themes of morality, ethics, and education. The story of Natasha Wiley moves readers through her experience in America-5 and the settlement's progress in clean sweeps of tribes on The Outside. Upon first reading the book, the reader will experience what feels like the familiar, overarching dystopian themes of the Hunger Games trilogy, but Ariel Djanikian provides a more realistic and descriptive experience for her readers. This review provides thoughts and insights regarding *The Office of Mercy* as a common read for institutions looking to engage first-year students during their transition into college. While the book's plot and universe are flawed, the story motivates deeper thinking in a way that grips the reader and makes it hard to put the book down. Additionally, the story raises reflections around judgements and stereotypes of Native American and Indigenous people.

*The Office of Mercy* centers around Natasha Wiley, who lives in an indoor, completely self-functioning settlement called America-5. Prior to The Storm, a devastating event that collapsed global civilization, a group of wealthy individuals created a series of settlements that are completely self-functioning; they cultivate their own crops, live by an ethical code, and have mastered technology to prolong and create life. As an Epsilon, Natasha grows up in American-5 with four previous generations to guide her learning. Contrary to her fellow Epsilons, she frequently needs to

put up The Wall: a mental technique to control her thinking when she strays from the ethical codes she has been trained to obey. Even with this irregularity, she finds herself by age 20 working at *The Office of Mercy*, the government office America-5 uses to conduct sweeps of tribes who live outside of the settlement.

According to their ethical code, the settlement will do everything they can to put an end to suffering before it happens. The tribes, who have various names, live off the land outside of the settlement. Their movements are tracked until all of the tribe members are together in one area. Only at this moment does *The Office of Mercy* conduct a sweep - an execution of all tribe members, to end all suffering. This government office keeps track of the number of tribe members swept, and tallies them along with other settlements across The North American continent. Natasha, along with her colleagues in the office, are tasked with the constant monitoring of tribes, execution of sweeps, and cleanup of any remaining suffering from the tribes post-sweep.

After a sweep of The Pines, Natasha is selected to embark on a mission to The Outside led by Jeffrey, a Delta who is also her closest friend and supervisor in *The Office of Mercy*. After weeks of training, Jeffrey leads Natasha and their team to The Outside and the site of the sweep to ensure it is clean. On the way back from the mission, Natasha is captured by tribe members and is brought back to their home base underground. At this secret location, she speaks to The Cranes - a previous tribe who were thought to have been completely swept - and learns they aren't as foreign as she believed them to be; they have families, speak English, have a vibrant set of traditions and cultural practices, and are looking to live in peace. She also learns that she was once a member of The Cranes, and during the sweep of The Cranes, a member of America-5 took her into the settlement instead of letting her die on The Outside. The Cranes believe Natasha can help them, and she escapes The Cranes' tribe confused, shocked, and uncertain about her next steps.

After being rescued by her team members, Natasha spends the next weeks confiding in some of her closest friends and decides to take action to help The Cranes. While she knows the Alphas and Jeffrey do

not agree with her actions, she organizes a plan to help The Cranes steal a missile used for sweeps and threaten to detonate it inside America-5 in order to find peace between America-5 and the tribe. Natasha hopes that this mission would allow The Cranes to live on The Outside in peace, which would allow her to return home to The Cranes and never step foot in America-5 again. When the day comes for The Cranes to arrive and achieve their mission, Natasha is blindsided by The Cranes attacking the settlement's walls and conducting an all-out war against America-5 and its citizens. Hours of bloodshed and destruction ensue and while many members of the settlement are killed, The Cranes' leaders are killed and America-5 survives. The book concludes with Natasha, through technology developed by The Alphas, emphatically experiencing the same, literal suffering that members of The Cranes felt during the assault on America-5. She begins re-education in America-5 on the moral code and learns to put up The Wall more efficiently than ever before.

As described in the plot summary, the language of the book requires the reader to buy in to word choices that Djanikian uses to describe the details of America-5. Some of these language choices are better than others - for example, an elevator, presumably due to noise, is described as "The Elephant", and the outside of the settlement is literally called "The Outside." Other pieces of the book's universe are more metaphorical; for example, "The Wall" is described as putting up a mental block on an area of thought to not dwell on it too much. Some characters utilize juvenile phrases like "Oh my Alpha" as an expression to not believe something is happening, and is in reference to The Alphas - those who are the oldest generation and are in the highest positions of power. The author believes these choices in language help simplify some of the plot pieces to help the reader focus on larger themes of the book. However, I believe the reader has to overcome these flaws and stylistic choices, which detract from rather than enhance the positive aspects of the story

While flawed, this book could be an excellent choice for a common read program. Many first-year students find themselves in transitional moments that require reflection, challenge, and the ability to make meaningful, yet difficult, decisions for their journey. Professors could

also pull on the threads of ethical and moral decision-making on which this book centers its entire plot. Natasha Wiley experiences these themes similarly and reflects on her relationships with both the tribes and America-5 citizens. Additionally, this new generation of students engage in conflict in different ways than previous ones. Conflict is ever apparent throughout the theme of the book and as first-years meet classmates, roommates, or create other points of connection, conflict is expected to come up. Contrary to many other young adult dystopian stories, Natasha's experience with conflict and decision-making feels authentic and relatable. Her internal and external struggles are complex and layered, producing suggestive and inquisitive reactions for a reader's experience. These would translate to excellent opportunities for discussion.

Finally, the relationship between the settlement and the tribes in the novel bears a resemblance to the complex history between the United States and the Native American and Indigenous communities in our contemporary society. Given this book's language around "tribes" and Natasha and her fellow America-5's experiences with judgement and stereotypes of people who live on "The Outside," this book should spark thought and discussion on Native American and Indigenous people. Many of these judgements, stereotypes, and misunderstandings of the tribes for characters in America-5 is a result of brainwashing and norms created by people in positions of power and it's like the book is holding a mirror up to the present day world. Additionally, as a result of colonization, most universities occupy space on Native American and Indigenous people's land, and staff and faculty who assign this common read need to have a discussion with their students about that. If administrators are looking to have more discussions in and outside of the classroom around attitudes towards Native American and Indigenous people and misconceptions of their experiences, this book is a productive platform to do just that. Conversations around land acknowledgements, awareness of tribes who were forcibly removed from their land, and representation are all topics that a facilitator could speak on while relating to this story. All in all, while *The Office of Mercy* has its shortcomings, the story evokes reflections salient to the first-year experience and offers opportunity for facilitators and staff members to hold rich discussions.



