

Flexible Wings

Veda Stamps

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Flexible Wings is a powerful story with a uniquely contemporary military brat heroine and timeless themes of love, family, friendship, and self-acceptance.

Japan, Italy, Florida, Texas, Virginia, and South Carolina have all been home to Summer Stevenson, but the challenge of following her active duty military parents around the world doesn't seem to be getting any easier. In *Flexible Wings*, Veda Stamps addresses some of the most common yet unexplored concerns facing the families of America's servicemen and women today.

Moving to Valencia, California and leaving behind her best friend, Esperanza, was not eleven-year-old Summer Stevenson's idea. In fact, everything about this latest relocation has Summer tied in knots. Her father is busy pursuing a steady stateside career, her mother deploys to an unknown location, and the neighborhood girls all seem to be bullies. Then Summer joins the community swim team, her beloved Baachan (grandma) moves in to help out, and Summer starts to see herself and her life in a whole new light.

A delightfully honest fusion of courage, strength, and insecurity, Summer accepts her mixed heritage with pride and practicality, "Dad is Japanese and African American, and Mom is African American and a bunch of other stuff. ... I'll just tell people that I'm African American to keep things simple." Olympic medalist and competitive swimmer, Lia Neal, also a blend of African American and Asian, keeps Summer motivated as she tastes failure and success at swim meets, handles poolside bullies and crushes, and attempts to subdue her full head of braids into impossibly small swim caps.

The author manages to incorporate numerous sensitive topics as seen from Summer's point of view and through the filter of her eleven-year-old experience which allows open discussions about PTSD, deployment, IEDs, and even death in the line of duty to occur without overwhelming or confusing. Summer has nightmares about her parents' combat experiences, and both her mother and father struggle to reconcile the careers they've chosen with the continued well-being of their family.

Although Stamps's research into military life gives *Flexible Wings* a large dose of believability, certain phrases may stand out to anyone more familiar with the jargon and tradition of the armed forces. For example, Summer's mother and father, who both "chose to join the Navy," would be unlikely to refer to themselves or their children as "soldier," a term reserved for members of the Army only. Ditto for Summer's swim coach Julie whose father was a marine (a US Marine is always a marine, members of the US Navy are sailors). Summer's mother, a helicopter pilot, mentions being promoted to a "commanding officer," a position that would make "reenlist" an incorrect word choice. Even so, it's likely that younger children, with vaguer notions of what their parents actually do, as well as those not accustomed to military lingo would not notice the oversights, particularly since the rest of Summer's tale rings true.

Flexible Wings is a powerful story, with a uniquely contemporary heroine and timeless themes of love, family, friendship, and self-acceptance. It's an excellent choice for upper elementary, middle school, or classrooms and

libraries looking for positive, multicultural, realistic fiction. Military and civilian families alike would benefit from seeing the world through Summer's eyes.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (June 18, 2015)

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