Don't Drink the Diet Lemonade, and Don't Cut Off Any Body Parts

Research states there are approximately between 300,000 and 3 million people in cults in the United States alone. However, if you've ever watched an interaction between a pre-teen or teenage group of girls, then you know that number is significantly higher. The middle to early high school years are full of change and uncertainty, and everyone is trying to find their spot in the world. To carve out a place for themselves, some people fall prey to a cultish mindset and conform to the point of danger. The short story, "Ponies," introduces readers to a character who falls victim to exactly this: Kij Johnson's story, "Ponies," uses the plot to show the Barbara's journey with female social hierarchies that force conformity and create a cult-like experience that pushes people to give up their uniqueness.

From the very beginning of the story, it becomes clear to readers that Barbara is invited to partake in what appears to be cult-like behavior. The fact that the group of girls, referred to as TheOtherGilrs, has a title, is the first suggestion that they have created a cult. Johnson sets up this plot line from the start when she writes, "You and your pony [and Sunny's name is handwritten here in puffy-girl letters] are invited to a cutting-out party with TheOtherGirls! If we like you, and if your Pony does okay, we'll let you hang out with us. 'Yay!' Sunny says. 'I can't wait to have friends!' She reads over Barbara's shoulder…" (Johnson 158). Although Sunny and Barbara are already friends with each other, they feel the need to try to become part of the group of "cool" females so that they can fit in. This is the way most pre-teen and teenage girls feel when there is an almost cult-like group of the "it-girls." TheOtherGirls all have specific roles and play specific games: "playing Wii tennis and watching the Ponies play HideAndSeek and Who'sPrettiest and ThisIsTheBestGame. They are all there, SecondGirl and SuckUpGirl and EveryoneLikesHerGirl and the rest," (Johnson 159-160). Barbara wants to be included so badly,

and the plot rises as she is trying to find her way into the group, at the end, the plot falls when she realizes that these people aren't really her friends. Throughout Barbara's journey trying to become part of the group, readers can see how female social groups have hierarchies that aren't always healthy for their members.

As the party proceeds, Barbara works hard to meet the standards of TheOtherGirls; in doing so, she harms her only true friend. The climax of the plot initially appears to be when the girls force Barbara to cut off her pony's wings and horn, but readers begin to realize this is not the case. The group further shows their cult-like behavior when their actions take them past the point of no return, eventually leading to Sunny's disillusionment and death:

> There's a shiny trembling oval where the wing was as though Barbara cut rose-flavored Turkish Delight in half and saw the pink under the powdered sugar. Barbara thinks *It's sort of pretty*, and throws up…And then the horn lies in the grass beside the wings… 'You're not done yet,' TopGirl says. 'Now the voice. You have to take away her voice,' (Johnson 160)

Despite Barbara's disgust with actually having to cut off Sunny's wings and horn, she does it anyway because she wants to fit in so badly. Through this situation, Barbara shows the dangers that lie in sacrificing special pieces of yourself or others on the altar of popularity. Barbara wants to fit in and meet societal norms so much so that she is willing to hurt her best friend, Sunny, to reach the end goal of being part of TheOtherGirls. However, Sunny realizes that she is not willing to do what the other girls are asking of her: "'I can't!' Barbara tells TheOtherGirls…But even as she cries until her face is cakes with snot and tears, she knows she's going to… 'No,' Sunny says suddenly. 'Not even for

friends. Not even for you,'" (Johnson 161). Sunny realizes her worth and decides that she would rather be her own person than lose pieces of herself to conform. Sunny realizes what Barbara did not: that a person doesn't have to be "normal" or like everyone else to have friends. Sunny is unwilling to follow the crowd and meet everyone's expectations at the expense of herself and her own unique qualities.

The girls' immediate resolve and dismissal of Barbara cements their cult-behavior and shows that sometimes fitting in is not what works best for you or your mental health. The story starts by boldly explaining the concept of Ponies and cutting-out parties: "This is the way it's always been, as long as there have been Ponies. All ponies have wings. All Ponies have horns. All Ponies can talk. Then all Ponies go to a cutting-out party with AllTheGirls and they give up two of the three, because that's what has to happen if a Girl is going to fit in with TheOtherGirls" (Johnson 158-59). This displays the consistency that the characters in the story feel and how stuck they are in a world that seems to have very limited possibilities to change. These steps are very ritualistic and fall into line with most cults and their beliefs of following a specific order. Cults are generally a negative influence on a person's life, and can lead them to do things that they might not want to do or could be harmful to them: "...Mom bought some cookies and there's Coke Zero and Diet Red Bull and diet lemonade'" (Johnson 159). Although this seems harmless, readers can see that most of these options are low-fat or diet. This seems to be hinting to an underlying theme of conformity, where you want to be skinny and only like certain foods so that you can fit in. This aspect of teenage-girlhood can lead to things like eating disorders, which severely impacts girl's mental health. Barbara is being pulled in to this potentially poor decision making, and it could lead her down a path that she doesn't really want to follow. Despite Barbara's desperate attempts to fit in, like drinking diet lemonade and being willing to maul her

best friend and pony, Sunny, all of her effort is eventually proved to be futile. “Sunny cries out and then there is nothing, only the sound of pounding hooves from the tight circle of Ponies…Into the silence TopGirl says, ‘Cookies?’ Her voice sounds fragile and false…‘Why are *you* here?’ FirstGirl says, as though noticing her for the first time. ‘You’re not OneofUs.’ TheOtherGirls nod. ‘You don’t have a pony’” (Johnson 161). Barbara sacrificed it all on the altar of being “the same” and wanting to fit in and have other friends, when she didn’t realize that she was being sucked into a cult and tricked into betraying her one constant friend throughout her beginning unpopularity. The group’s cult-behavior eventually catches up to them and brings about events that they are powerless to stop, even though they seem to be very controlled and detached. This conformity and desire to be a part of a larger group, no matter the cost, is very dangerous for young girls and their mental health and can create lasting effects on their future.

Despite this particular sect’s affinity for Wii sports (which is a great game), it was, nonetheless, still a cult. TheOtherGirls pushed Barbara and Sunny into difficult positions because they were so set in their ways and wanted another person to fall into line like the rest of them. However, this story shows the very real dangers of giving up what makes one special to “fit in.” Barbara and Sunny have to confront this danger, and only Barbara makes it out alive. This leaves a powerful message of learning to be confident, unique, and strong, so that no one else falls prey to the cancer that is normality and Coke Zero (and also Pony-killing cults).

Works Cited

Johnson, Kij. "Ponies." *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*, Small Beer Press, 2012, pp. 158-61.