

**Out of Darkness**  
Ashley Hope Perez  
Carolrhoda Lab, 2015

**Reviews**

- [Booklist](#) (1 Sept. 2015): “Pérez’s latest—following *The Knife and the Butterfly* (2012)—is a powerful work of historical fiction set in New London, Texas, that revolves around events leading up to the horrific 1937 school explosion that killed close to 300 people. This gripping story centers on high-school senior Naomi, a Mexican American girl who recently arrived from San Antonio with her half siblings, twins Beto and Cari, and their father, oil-field worker Henry. Naomi’s struggle to learn how to take care of the household chores is complicated by her dark past with Henry and the overt racism she faces in the segregated town. She reluctantly befriends and then falls in love with an African American boy, Wash, who is both brilliant and kind to her younger brother and sister. Pérez’s skillful use of multiple perspectives creates a full and well-rounded sense of place and story. Elegant prose and gently escalating action will leave readers gasping for breath at the tragic climax and moving conclusion.”
- [Kirkus](#) (1 June 2015, starred review): “A Mexican-American girl and a black boy begin an ill-fated love in the months leading up to a catastrophic 1937 school explosion in East Texas. The powerful story opens with the legendary school explosion in New London and then rewinds to September 1936. Naomi has begrudgingly left behind her *abuelitos* in San Antonio for a new life with her younger half siblings, twins, and their long-absent white father, Henry. Now a born-again Christian, Henry struggles to atone for his sins. The siblings struggle to fit into the segregated oil town, where store signs boast “No Negroes, Mexicans, or dogs.” The precocious twins read better than half the senior class, and dark-skinned Naomi is guilty of not only being Mexican, but also of being “prettier than any girl in school.” Their one friend is Wash, a brilliant African-American senior from the black part of town. Pérez deftly weaves multiple perspectives—including Henry and “the Gang,” the collective voice of the racist students—into her unflinchingly intense narrative, but the story ultimately belongs to Naomi and Wash. Their beautifully detailed love story blossoms in the relative seclusion of the woods, where even stepfathers can’t keep them apart. But as heartbreaking events unfold, the star-crossed lovers desperately hope that any light can penetrate the black smoke cloud of darkness spreading around them. A powerful, layered tale of forbidden love in times of unrelenting racism. (author’s note) (*Historical fiction. 14 & up*)”
- [School Library Journal](#) (June 2015. Starred Review): “Gr 9 Up—The 1937 school explosion in New London, TX, remains the deadliest school disaster in U.S. history. With that real-life tragedy as a starting point, Pérez adds greater volatility with race, class, and family dysfunction, by introducing a love story between two teens from different worlds in a tiny community where nothing remains hidden for long. Mexican American Naomi, 15, arrives from San Antonio with her younger twin half-siblings to live with the twins’ white father, a born-again Christian too fond of the bottle. She’s ostracized at her segregated school, even as boys objectify her and girls punish her for her outstanding beauty. The twins are first to make friends with Wash, an African

American high school senior whose easy, caring manner Naomi can't ignore. As love grows, danger draws closer, with the most immediate threats at home. Narrator Benita Robledo moves effortlessly between rigid control and panicked acceleration, imbuing the multiple viewpoints with authenticity and empathy. Lincoln Hoppe's near-growling interruptions as "The Gang," a collective representation of racist classmates, remain menacingly foreboding throughout. VERDICT Pérez's latest, recipient of a 2016 Printz Honor, is wide-eyed testimony to the undeniable best and unrelenting worst of humanity; turning away (or turning off) is never an option. ["Set against the backdrop of an actual historical event, Pérez's young adult novel gives voice to many long-omitted facets of U.S. history": *SLJ* 6/15 starred review of the Carolrhoda Lab book.]"

- [New York Times](#) (6 Nov. 2015): "The novels that burn into our minds as young adults often involve horror of some kind. A mere mention of "All Quiet on the Western Front" or "I Am the Cheese," and I'm right back to brooding again in the ocean-deep emotions of my adolescence. What is that urge, the desire to soak in anguish and injustice as we come of age? Whatever it is, Ashley Hope Pérez's new novel, "Out of Darkness," fills the need. Her layered tale of color lines, love and struggle in an East Texas oil town is a pit-in-the-stomach family drama that goes down like it should, with pain and fascination, like a mix of sugary medicine and artisanal moonshine. I actually had to close the book at one point to seek respite with Facebook. And puppies. When I dove back in a few days later, it was hard not to marvel at the book's potency. Pérez, who has spent much of her career teaching, sets her story against the 1937 New London school explosion, the worst school disaster in American history, which killed 294 people. But the blast is only one of this book's horrors, and not the one that hurts the most. Her story is about race — about gradients and forbidden crossings. Indeed, escaping from the forces that have shaped the United States for centuries proves impossible for Naomi, for Wash, for the twins and for Henry. The end of the book careers from one threat to another, but the conclusion is never in doubt: New London blows up, shudders and collapses. A tragedy, real and racial, swallows us whole, and lingers."

## Awards

- [Michael L. Printz Award Nominee](#), 2016
- [Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award Nominee](#), 2016
- [Lincoln Award Nominee](#), 2018
- [Américas Award](#), 2016
- [Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award](#), 2016

## Lists

- [School Library Journal Best Book](#) of 2015
- [Kirkus Reviews Best Book](#) of 2015
- [2016 Top Ten TAYSHAS](#) selection
- [Spirit of Texas](#) selection

## Response to challenges

- [Leader ISD, Texas](#) (1 Dec. 2021): Along with ten other titles, *Out of Darkness*, “will not be accessible for use in high school student choice book clubs or classroom libraries. Between November 29 and December 17, district administrators will partner with our high school campuses to ensure these instructional materials are not accessible for HS Book Clubs and Classroom Libraries.”
- [Title returned to shelf](#), Henrico County, VA (24 March 2022): Copies of *Out of Darkness* were returned to the shelves of Henrico County Public Schools libraries this week after being removed late last year. Originally all copies of the title were pulled from shelves for review, more information can be found about the complaint on [Henrico County News](#).

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