Second Reaction: A Lesson in the Tenacity of Education


Trudy Roe

As a reading interventionist at an elementary school, not surprisingly, one of the first things I routinely do with my small reading groups when beginning a new book is to notice the cover and start talking about what might be inside. Several students had the same initial response to the cover of Rain School: “This is a good book.” This seemed like a fairly strong and premature pronouncement before even reading a single page. When I asked for an explanation, invariably students said they liked the bright colors on the children’s clothing. Furthermore, several students noted that it looked like the cover had been “colored with crayons” and it made them feel good. I had expected a few comments about the possible meaning of the title, Rain School, but that was not the case. As we began reading and started to unpack why this was in fact “a good book,” three topics kept emerging: bright colors, tasks done together, and simple expectations.

The use of deep, vibrant colors on the cover and throughout the book helps underscore the vigor of a village community in Chad, the setting of this story. The skies are dark blue and menacing, yet the children are lively and laughing as they race to shelter. The land “looks hot” according to some of my readers who noted the orange and gold hues of the landscape, yet the children have contented expressions as they toil to make clay bricks for the walls of their school. The children of the Rain School are arrayed in brightly colored clothes, expectant faces beaming directly at the reader as they wait for their teacher’s arrival on the first day of school. They are sitting in neat rows of mud desks under the cool and inviting shadiness of the thatched roof. All these deep, brilliant colors
seem to underscore the idea that, despite the obvious need, good things are happening here. Learning is happening here. People are thriving.

Tasks are often done together in this land of the Rain School. My students questioned why, in one illustration, all the school children walk together and hold hands on their way to school. “Do they all know each other? Are they all cousins?” one reader asked. Even some of the village farm animals follow this happy procession along its route. It was also pointed out that all the future pupils of the school help in its construction. In contrast to how things are done in the U.S., this wasn’t a construction job undertaken solely by skilled, adult workers, with the children’s role simply to show up after its completion. I posed the question of how children might feel and act in a school they had built themselves compared to a school built by a construction company.

We also talked about the simple things that make the children of this central-African village happy. They carry no backpacks on their way to school, and many are shoeless. They have modest hopes of getting a notebook and perhaps even a pencil on their first day of school. They celebrate the beauty of learning to neatly print the alphabet. And when the rainy season arrives and the school melts back into the ground, “it doesn’t matter” because the knowledge gained there is tucked safely inside each child. The school will be rebuilt each September and rise from the mud again. It’s all about the joy of learning.

Rain School is easy to share with young readers because of the common connection of school—what are the differences between “here” and “there” that we can see? What are the differences between “here” and “there” that might be felt? It is easy to engage readers because nearly every page begs the question: What am I noticing in this story and how do I feel about it?

In hindsight, an obvious question to ask at the end of this book is, “Why is Rain School a good title for this story?” While I neglected to ask that question, I did ask this: “What do you think the author wanted us to know when he wrote Rain School?” While there were certainly some imaginative responses regarding theme, many replies showed recognition of the importance of community to the villagers: They helped each other get to school, they helped each other build the school, and they helped each other learn. And most importantly, my young readers finally came around to the same understanding as the Chadian villagers: buildings pass away, but the knowledge and growth gained there does not. Education is worth every effort.

About the Author

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