Second Reaction: A History of Building Community: Empathy, Service, and Jane Addams’s Legacy


*Candence Malhiet Robillard*

*The House That Jane Built* by Tanya Lee Stone offers young readers a glimpse at the life and work of social activist Jane Addams. The book chronicles Addams’s developing altruism through her observations of the poor, both in the United States and in London. From there, Stone describes Hull House and the growth of playgrounds, art galleries, schools, and public baths that grew from Addams’s dream to “fix the world” (unpaged). Stone emphasizes Addams’s ability to use wealth and privilege to create social programs for Chicago’s poorest residents. Undoubtedly, Addams’s Hull House succeeded in part because of her ability to secure financial support for her social programs. Moreover, though, Addams staffed the settlement house with like-minded individuals who lived, worked, and participated fully in the kind of community they wished to create. One cannot overlook Addams’s tireless compassion for the people of Chicago as the secret to her success. Stone offers opportunities to create open discussions not only about figures in American history, but also about social responsibility and the ways in which an individual can build community.

I shared *The House That Jane Built* with my daughter’s fourth grade class, none of whom had ever heard of Jane Addams. I asked the children to imagine what sorts of work Jane
Addams might do if she were working in our community today. Then, I asked them to write Jane Addams a letter in which they described some kind of program that could benefit people in our community. Such a prompt engages students to consider current social issues. If one of our goals as educators is to encourage empathy in our students, then asking them how they can use the talents and resources they have for the greater good is a worthwhile endeavor.

The children’s letters indicate that they indeed see disparities between rich and poor. They referred to our city’s homeless population, children in poverty, and the sick and elderly who could use help from a caring community. They suggested building low-cost restaurants that could feed people and provide jobs. They also imagined public swimming pools built on unkempt lots and stray animals fostered by loving families.

Jane Addams is not part of the curriculum our fourth grade students study; however, using nonfiction such as this is a way to incorporate figures from history whose names may not be recognizable, but whose contributions have created the communities in which we continue to participate. If I were to extend activities on The House That Jane Built, I would ask the children to consider the ways in which they could actually participate in the work of building a diverse community. The students with whom I worked largely come from affluent areas of our city. They see the poor often only from a distance, but since they have empathy toward those who do not live the way that they do, an opportunity to participate in community service would not only enrich their understanding of Addams’s social work, but also continue the very spirit that Addams embodied.

**About the Author**

**Candence Malhiet Robillard** has taught high school English for twenty years. She is currently a doctoral student in English education and curriculum theory at Louisiana State University. Her professional interests include the intersection of literature and popular culture and discovering ways to make literature meaningful to students.