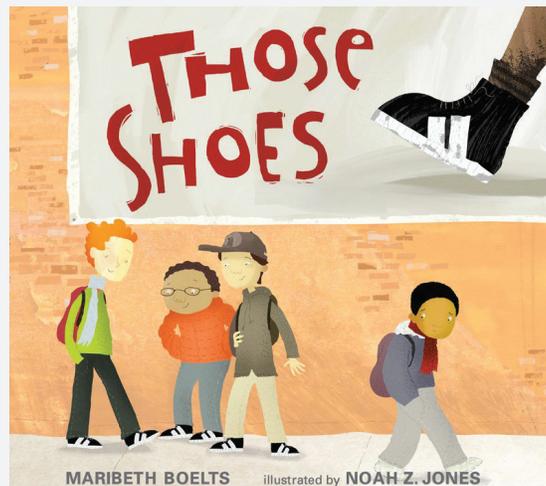


First Opinion: To Stand in *Those Shoes*: Multiple Perspectives on Empathy

Boelts, Maribeth. *Those Shoes*. Illustrated by
Noah Z. Jones, Candlewick Press, 2009.

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There are few emotions more keenly felt in childhood than want, whether it is the desire for others to understand and like you or to speed the growing process along so one might embark on adult adventures. In an increasingly consumption-oriented culture, these relationships and statuses are often mediated through the collection of material goods. Want is often not about the object itself, but what the object affords us socially (Pugh preface). Thematically, Maribeth Boelts's *Those Shoes* addresses, headfirst, the force of wanting something in childhood, weaving narrative strands about empathy throughout to create a story that is both entertaining and enlightening.

The story of *Those Shoes* revolves around Jeremy, whose entire happiness, he is convinced, resides in acquiring a pair of black high-tops with two white stripes, though his grandmother is firm in explaining that such shoes are out of their household budget. Those are the shoes, he is convinced, that will reaffirm his place as the fastest runner in school after Brandon T. shows up in his own pair of those shoes, claiming the title for himself. As more and more of Jeremy's classmates show up at school in their own pair of those shoes, his desire for them intensifies, reaching an almost feverish pitch when one of his current shoes comes apart during a game of kickball at school. Mr. Alfey, the school guidance counselor, gives him a pair of shoes that

are the antithesis of those shoes: blue, Velcro, and emblazoned with a cartoon Jeremy is quite sure he has never even seen. His classmates, save for Antonio Parker, laugh at these shoes.

Despite her earlier declaration that there was no room in the budget for those shoes, Grandma and Jeremy go to a shoe store after she reveals she has “a little bit of money set aside” (Boelts unpagged). The brand-new shoes are too expensive, so the duo spends the rest of the day scouring thrift stores in the hopes of finding those shoes. At their third thrift store, Jeremy finds them, only this pair is too small for his feet. Jeremy refuses to allow small shoes to get in his way, though he has to purchase them with his own money after Grandma tells him she “can’t spend good money on shoes that don’t fit” (Boelts unpagged). Hoping they will stretch, he manages to wear those shoes for only a handful of days before he begins to wear the shoes given to him by Mr. Alfey again.

Jeremy begins to notice Antonio’s shoes, which are in a similar condition as his previous pair, tenuously held together by a flapping piece of duct tape, and seem to be smaller than Jeremy’s own shoes. Out on the playground, the two play basketball, swing, and race one another as Jeremy tell himself he’s not going to do it, each time more loudly than the time before. This leaves the reader to infer that Jeremy is thinking about those shoes sitting in his closet at home and how they would fit Antonio. Antonio comes to Jeremy’s house for supper and, after seeing the shoes in Jeremy’s room, inquires why Jeremy doesn’t wear them. A nonchalant shrug is his reply as he registers Antonio’s want for the shoes, a feeling that results in a sleepless night and an early morning run to Antonio’s stoop, where he places those shoes, rings the doorbell, and runs. Antonio wears those shoes to school and Jeremy, despite feeling mad about his own shoes, feels happy when he sees Antonio.

While *Those Shoes* is a story about a boy’s want for something he cannot afford, it is also about empathy, the ability “to stand in others’ shoes, to see with their eyes, and to feel with their hearts” (Pink 159). There are multiple examples of empathy throughout the story, from Grandmother recognizing the shoes were more about acceptance by Jeremy’s peers and using some of her set-aside money to potentially buy them, to Antonio, who doesn’t laugh when Jeremy returns to class with his “Mr. Alfey” shoes, to Jeremy himself. Each example of empathy in *Those Shoes* is nuanced and realistic: Grandmother’s pragmatic decision not to purchase the shoes in the thrift store and Jeremy’s repeated and ever-intense reticence to give those shoes to Antonio. Noah Z. Jones’s cartoonlike illustrations highlight the expressions of the characters, providing an additional element of exploration within the book. *Those Shoes* provides plenty of insight into the notion of empathy without needing to resort to didactic measures thanks to well-defined characters and an engaging narrative.

Works Cited

Pink, Daniel H. *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. Penguin, 2006.

Pugh, Allison. *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. University of California Press, 2009.

About the Author

Nicholas E. Husbye is a literacy education researcher and teacher educator at the University of Missouri in St. Louis. Growing up, he desperately wanted a pair of bright-red, low-top Converse Chuck Taylors, but his parents would never buy them for him. Now all grown up, he has several pairs in a rainbow of colors.