Second Reaction: Discussing Peer Pressure, Empathy, and Selflessness with Young Readers


*Maria Thereza Xavier Bastos*

*Those Shoes*, written by Maribeth Boelts and beautifully illustrated by Noah Z. Jones, is a great book to get young readers discussing the realities other people face that might not yet be familiar to them. It brings out the themes of empathy, friendship, and selflessness and prepares young children ready think about needs versus wants, which is crucial for triggering critical thinking in their minds. It starts by showing that not all kids live with their parents or have material things readily available for them whenever they want.

The story revolves around a young boy, Jeremy, who lives with his loving grandmother and dreams about having black high-top shoes similar to the ones the other kids in school have. He asks his grandmother to buy them, but she can’t afford them and reminds him that what he currently needs are snow boots for the winter instead of new black high-tops. One day, while in school, one of Jeremy’s shoes comes apart and his guidance counselor gives him a used pair that Jeremy thinks is too childish. As Jeremy returns to class wearing the donated shoes, all the kids laugh at them, except for Antonio. His grandmother then decides to try to purchase the shoes Jeremy has been dreaming about, but is saddened by the fact that she still cannot afford them. They do not give up and instead search through the thrift shops in town, only to find a pair that is too small for Jeremy’s feet. Not conceding, Jeremy uses his
own money to purchase the shoes despite being uncomfortable while wearing them. After realizing he has no choice but to wear the donated shoes because the new high-tops don't fit him, he notices that Antonio's shoes are taped up and his feet are smaller than Jeremy's. Jeremy struggles with whether or not he should give Antonio his high-tops, but they become friends and he eventually gives them to him. In the end, they both enjoy racing in the snow with Jeremy wearing his brand-new snow boots.

This book is a must-share with K–3 students and with young readers at home. In a world where peer pressure and consumerism are prevalent in social settings, it is vital to highlight that basic things such as shoes can easily be reused by others and that pursuing only new items because of the latest fad or wishes to fit in is not ideal. Moreover, young children need to be aware of the economic situations of others who might not be as fortunate. The earlier they become aware of this, the easier it might be for them to understand and discuss issues of inequality and social justice.

When reading this to my five-year-old, I asked him from the very beginning to pretend to be Jeremy and to describe to me what and how he felt as he experienced the things that Jeremy went through. As we read the book, my son answered questions about the story. He said he was “sad” and “his feelings were hurt because the kids were laughing at his funny shoes.” However, he later felt happy when giving his friend his own shoes because “sharing is good” and “running with a friend on the snow wearing snow boots is fun and that he needed the snow boots to be able to run on the snow, but not the black high-top shoes.” Therefore, I was thrilled that he was able to point out the difference between want and need and the importance of selflessness and friendship as themes of the book. When asked what his favorite part of the book was, he said, “when Jeremy gave Antonio his shoes because he really needed them for playing.” Thus, again I was happy to see that my son realized that giving is important and that books such as this one are wonderful tools for conveying great messages and teaching young readers about being considerate and mindful of others.

**About the Author**

**Maria Thereza Xavier Bastos** has worked as an English as a First Language (EFL)/ESL instructor for over fifteen years and is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University (IU). Her current research focuses on the practices and beliefs of novice world language and ESL teachers and the integration of 1:1 technology. She currently works as a project manager for an IU School of Education outreach program that explores the teaching of Spanish through art for K–6 students. Bastos enjoys reading multilingual and multicultural books with kids and spending time with her two children.