Second Reaction: “But That’s Not a Happy Ending!”: Regret as a Pathway to Empathy


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The first time I read Jacqueline Woodson’s *Each Kindness*, I was accompanied by my wide-eyed, five-year-old son and my eight-year-old daughter, a wise-beyond-her-years third grader who immediately announced that she had read the book “a million times . . . well, at least once.” This poem of a story, which utilizes free verse to manifest the pain evoked by children’s social hierarchies, is lushly illustrated by the talented E. B. Lewis. Like any good picture book, the accompanying swirl of images, brushed with echoes of impressionism, quickly becomes an inextricable component of the reader’s experience.

The story opens with the age-old “new girl introduced to the class by the teacher” trope, but the angle that Woodson and Lewis take is anything but well-worn. For instance, Lewis’s illustration of the moment of introduction positions the reader at floor level, looking up to see Maya, the new student, looking down in a cloud of shame. “It makes us feel small too!” my daughter interjected. To the reader’s surprise, however, Maya is not the protagonist of the story. Rather, Chloe, an established member of the class who participates in a class-wide shunning of Maya, is the first person narrator. When I asked my daughter why she thought
the main character was Chloe rather than Maya, she had no trouble articulating, “It feels like I’m a mean girl.” It is this element that sets *Each Kindness* apart from many in its genre. Rather than enabling young readers to hide behind simple affiliation with the persecuted, the story pushes us into identifying as the persecutor, a position that vividly made my children squirm as we progressed through the book.

In fact, throughout the book, perhaps the most important question to be engaging young readers with is “why?” Why did the authors make this move? What is the significance of Maya’s ragged clothes, the fact that Chloe didn’t smile back, the page describing the way Chloe spent her lunch with her friends “fingers laced together, whispering secrets into each other’s ears” (unpaged)? Why do our hearts hurt each time Maya opens up her hands to share another toy she brought to school—“a deck of cards, pick-up sticks, a small tattered doll” (unpaged)—only to be denied entry into social play? What emotions is Maya experiencing on her last day at the school when she took off on a solo ride across the entire yard using a jump rope made for two: “She didn’t look up once. . . . Just jumped, jumped, jumped” (unpaged).

These leaps from observation to inference quickly pushed my eight-year-old to exclaim: “She’s poor! She needs HELP! Not NOT HELP!” They also triggered multiple moments of personal connections. “Like remember the first time at [elementary school] and I didn’t know where to go and I couldn’t even spell my teacher’s name?” But while my children were quick to connect to feelings of not belonging, they found it harder to admit to relating to Chloe’s side of the story. This ability to see the potential of ugliness in ourselves requires sharp vision and painful honesty, and I found myself sharing stories with my babies of when I as a child, a teenager, a young adult, and now a middle-aged woman, have found myself participating in exclusionary social tactics not because I am simply mean but because I found myself caught up in a social system that felt larger than my own ability to sympathize.

The story concludes unresolved, and it is in this way that it lands its sucker punch. Maya suddenly stops attending the school, and the following day Chloe’s teacher engages her class in an object lesson using a bowl of water and a stone about the ways that our actions ripple: “This is what kindness does,” Ms. Albert said. “Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world” (unpaged). It is only at this moment that Chloe is struck with the impact of her actions towards Maya. Walking home alone from school that day, “her throat filled” with a sense of regret for her treatment of Maya: I watched the water ripple / as the sun set through the maples / and the chance of a kindness with Maya / became more and more / forever gone (unpaged).

Woodson holds back from giving Chloe a redo, from tying up the ending with a happy bow, and the unsettling impact is visceral. I asked my daughter what she thought about the ending, and she affirmed that it was “good because it makes you feel sad . . . because it’s a book about sad things. We’re supposed to! We did something wrong so we’re supposed to feel sad. It makes us want to do a kindness.” My five-year-old added that the entire book is good “because it gives kids a lesson . . . to be kind to people always.” But upon my read, the book is
a powerhouse *because* it refrains from dishing out lessons. Showing, after all, always trumps telling. By taking the readers on a curvy ride of the emotional trajectory of one young girl who participates in common but hurtful social moves, *Each Kindness* pushes us to confront our inner “mean girl” and, most profoundly, to experience the regret that can result. What better soil for empathy to take root?

**About the Author**

*Julie Rust* began her career teaching middle school and high school English and is now an assistant professor of education at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. Her research interests revolve around new media in secondary English classroom spaces and the critical-ethical questions that emerge when we empower young people to collaborate across differences.