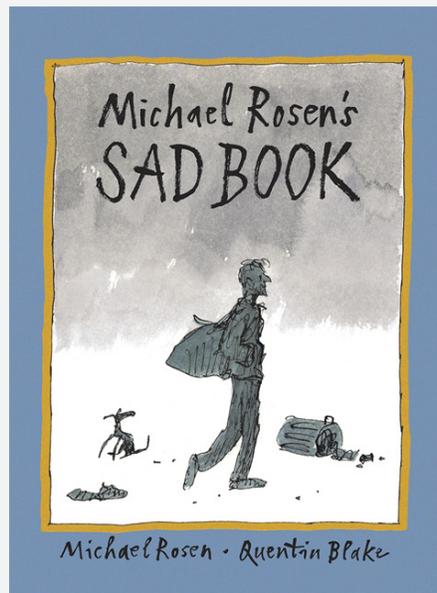


Second Reaction: Tears, Laughs, and Hugs: Building Community through a Shared Reading Experience

Rosen, Michael. *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. Illustrated
by Quentin Blake, Candlewick Press, 2004.

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Sometimes sad is very big. It's everywhere. All over me.
—From *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (unpaged)

Thus begins Michael Rosen's reflection on sadness, a picture book with an unconventional structure that invites conversations about the varied aspects of grief in readers' lives. Rather than having a narrative with characters, dialogue, and plot, Rosen describes why he's often sad, how that sadness manifests itself, and how he copes with his feelings of grief. Quentin Blake's illustrations, created with line sketches and watercolor, rely heavily on the use of color to convey emotion. The first two-page spread uses only sepia and grey to evoke sadness, while the next spread, which depicts positive memories of Rosen's dead son, uses brighter colors. Together, Rosen and Blake have created a powerfully moving book about the pervasiveness of deep grief as well as ways to find joy in life despite carrying such grief.

As a librarian in an urban elementary school, I knew this was a book that could provide an engaging invitation for my students to discuss grief in their own lives. I shared the book with my school counselor, and we decided to begin a book club with our upper elementary

students. Because she knew the children's personal histories better than I did, she talked individually with those she felt might be interested. We then obtained parental permission for students to participate.

Our group met in the school library during the students' lunch. At our first meeting, I briefly shared the cover and title of the book and explained that we'd use the book to help us explore sadness in our own lives. I saw nods, but there were few comments. In a soft voice and with many pauses, I began reading the book aloud. Interestingly, I was able to read just three pages before the students' interjected comments launched a lengthy conversation. They were intrigued when we read that the author's son, Eddie, had died. They studied the next pages carefully to glean hints about what might have happened to him.

Comments about Eddie's death and Rosen's feelings naturally led to a storm of anecdotes about the students' own experiences. In our first interaction with the book, we only read to the ninth page. After hearing about Rosen's coping strategies (talking with someone, withdrawing, banging on the table, and being mean to the cat), the students shared root causes of their own sadness. One has a father in "prison, not jail, but prison." Another has rarely seen her father, because he left the household when she was very young. Two students have experienced death in their families: twin sisters and an uncle. We shared tears, laughs, and hugs. Sadly, the students had to return to class before we'd had a chance to resolve the strong feelings released over lunch.

At our next gathering, we began with a few pages from *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, but our focus was on processing the emotions stirred in our previous meeting. Several said they'd gone home to have positive conversations with important adults in their lives. One girl cut up family photos, removing someone from the family images; later, after she felt some resolution, she said she was able to tape the pictures together again. The general consensus was that the students felt relieved to share the load and to know that each person wasn't the only one carrying grief. They now felt stronger connections to others in the school community and in their homes.

Souers and Hall argue that educators need to attend more to the lingering effects of trauma, rather than focusing on each child's personal story of adverse childhood experiences. I recognize that the statistics about childhood trauma are such that I need to assume that many in the school community have had adverse experiences. However, this book club has helped me put faces on the academic descriptions of an "epidemic" (Souers and Hall 22) of childhood trauma. I now have a gut-level understanding of the load that many of my students carry each day when they come to school. The school counselor and I were repeatedly struck by the resilience our students have demonstrated and humbled that the students trusted us and each other with their emotions and experiences. The power of this book is in the opportunity it gave the students to build a community with others who carry the burden of trauma. The quantity and intensity of students' conversations around this book reveal the great need for safe spaces in which children and youth can process their experiences and emotions.

Work Cited

Souers, Kristin, and Hall, Peter A. *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*. Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2016.

About the Author

Margaret Boling Mullin is an elementary school librarian in Indianapolis, Indiana. She holds a PhD from the Department of Literacy, Culture, and Language in the School of Education at Indiana University. She is passionate about books, reading, and writing, as well as creating spaces for children to develop those passions themselves.