Matt De La Peña (author) and Loren Long (illustrator) craft a poem of a children’s book in the lulling words and soothing images of *Love*. Not your typical chronological narrative, *Love* utilizes second-person point of view and incorporates beautiful snapshots of life on each page that dance with a swirl of diversely illustrated characters. The story’s narrative arc flows uninterrupted, yet the cast of characters switch race, ethnicity, and setting each time you turn the page. The reader is engulfed in a story that feels universal and strangely specific; a book that feels like it is certainly about oneself yet simultaneously also about a host of others. *Love* soars because of its classic blend of the abstract with the specific. It is a survey of the many forms of love and a tasting menu of the multi-flavored ways that love infuses a child’s life.

The book begins in the same way we all begin, with the blur of babyhood nestled in the sounds of the people we love. In the next few pages, it follows the untroubled chronological trajectory of a child’s early years. In the beginning of this book-song, love is a fairly predictable (but delightful) sensory shapeshifter; it can be the sound of parents’ voices, music on a radio, the smell of crashing waves, the sight of a sunset, a neighborhood play, even the “echo of your [own] laughter” (unpaged). Children reading this book could easily ride alongside these manifestations of love by writing or drawing their own “Love is . . .” based off of their daily lived realities.

The book would be compelling if it followed this course throughout and would resonate with the cheery free-verse genre typical in children’s literature. However, the book takes a turn
when a child is “whisked into the street” after a fire alarm goes off. A wise elder points the child toward the night sky and says: “Stars shine long after they’ve flamed out . . . and the shine they shine with is love” (unpaged). This key page deserves some time to unpack with children. Ask, “How is this line different from the others we’ve read so far? What might it signal? What do you think will happen next in the story?”

Lest you imagine this star imagery is just another sanguine metaphor for love, the next page features a startling image of a young boy huddled, upset, under the piano with a dog cuddled by his side, a domestic battle obviously ensuing in the same room. De La Peña accompanies the illustration with, “But it’s not only stars that flame out, you discover. / It’s summers too. / And friendships. / And people.” This surprise shift from whimsical to tragic takes Love out of the “cute poem” category and situates it securely in “real life issues.”

The book goes on to describe the coming-of-age realization that all is not right with the world and scary things happen. Importantly, the child lacks actual details about the horrific event and is shut out by her family in efforts to protect her. This confusion and loss of innocence is painfully depicted in a nightmare illustrated by a dark room filled with wide-open yet empty drawers, shadows, and gray-scale toys; “In your dream that night you are searching/ for a love that seems lost./ You open and close drawers,/ life cushions,/empty old toy bins,/ but there’s nothing” (unpaged). Children can relate to this bad dream sequence, and could be asked what dreams or moments they have experienced that made them feel scared, alone, or confused.

The book does not end there. A book called Love has, after all, a powerful hero waiting in the wings. The child is awakened from the dream cradled by his mother, whispering in his ear “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s love” (unpaged). The rest of the book features a more complicated, coming-of-age love that takes on greater range. The growing protagonist begins to see love as something to find and name, rather than an inherent quality of life, “And in time you learn to recognize/a love overlooked./ A love that wakes at dawn and rides to work on the bus./ A slice of burned toast tastes like love.” Love now shifts from self-centered to other-centered, from flawless to flawed. Love is in the “crease of your grandfather’s face,” “the rustling leaves of gnarled trees,” “the made-up stories your uncles tell,” and even “the man in rags outside the subway station” (unpaged). Children reading the book could benefit from a gentle push to name a life-moment where love is hiding. Ask, “How can we all get better at recognizing a love overlooked?”

In the end, love becomes internalized, “And the face staring back in the bathroom mirror—this too, is love” (unpaged). This page would be a good entry point to discuss with youth that our embodiment of love produces both a sense of security (self-love) and responsibility (we must be the love). The book culminates, like any good coming-of-age story, with a nod to the child’s future independence, walking away from his community and into the unknown. The last page features not sun and blue skies, but umbrellas and gray skies, signaling an insistence on a full-range love. There is beauty, too, in puddles. Why? Because, even in rain, “you’ll have love, love, love” (unpaged).
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.