

## First Opinion: Children See and Feel It Too: Reactions to Breaking News

Reul, Sarah Lynne. *The Breaking News*. New York, Roaring Brook Press, 2018. Print.

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It is very likely that you, Reader, have been in the position we find a young protagonist and her family experiencing in the book, *The Breaking News*, written and illustrated with clarity and care by Sarah Lynne Reul. It is likely you too have sat in front of the television or picked up your phone at the ping of an alert to a fresh horror highlighted by news media. Emotional reactions to incessant bad news close to and far from home have become all too familiar to us as adults. Reul peeks into children's experiences with bad news and shares a moving account of how we collectively become consumed by unsettling news stories. Across simple illustrations, her characters' eyes convey the impact of omnipresent bad news and what children might be able to contribute in response.

We see our protagonist's family dramatically change from happily planting seeds together to a new scene—parents staring sadly at the television and phones, as kids look on in confusion. Reul emphasizes how children are impacted in the wake of emotional upheaval: "Mom forgets to tuck me in. Dad is too tired for bedtime stories" (unpaged). Her book is a eulogy for how the caring practices of home and family can be upended in the face of each new, horrific breaking story.

Following the breaking news, our protagonist steps onto a school bus colored in gray tones with peers whose downcast eyes mimic those of hers and her family's. She offers a glimpse into how spaces that appear to be children-only also experience these impacts. Our protagonist astutely observes while peering down the aisle of the bus that "It seems like everyone else feels it too" (unpaged). For Reul, "everyone" means children too.

Reul offers an important lesson for adults. Ignoring or avoiding speaking about bad news does not keep kids safe—physically or emotionally. Indeed, from Newtown, Connecticut, to Flint, Michigan, to playing with BB guns on playgrounds in Ohio, to tent cities along the US/Mexico border, children are often the subject of breaking news around the United States as well as the world. Importantly, Reul positions the school and the sad-eyed teacher as sharing important reminders in times of crisis: “teacher says to look for the helpers” (unpaged). Unfortunately, the teacher does not explore this in great detail with her class. Instead, it is up to the children to figure out what this means.

Reul’s book left me wondering just how disillusioned we adults might be when it comes to what “big” or “small” acts might mean. Should our actions in response to world events be small caring gestures kept close to home or big, civic-minded and coordinated resistance? Our protagonist “wants to help in a BIG way” (unpaged). This is a reminder of why news feels overwhelming to us as adults—we also want to help in big ways but have found our limits too often. Our protagonist is not so encumbered, and engages directly in trial and error by putting on shows, sharing big smiles, drawing beautiful pictures, cleaning up around the house, and being on her best behavior. But nothing seems to work.

“I feel small,” she notes when none of these efforts pay off and closes her eyes. When she opens her eyes, she sees her younger brother hugging their dog, who smiles back up at him. She shifts to doing one small thing that she can bear witness to—watering a plant, something she and her family were doing when the bad news broke. She starts to notice that small acts accumulate. She reads to her brother, plays with her dog, opens curtains. She takes on a caregiving role that she learned from her loving family. Reul writes that, “Small things don’t solve everything. The bad news is still there after all, but so are we” (unpaged). As our protagonist’s parents begin to notice, they too step up and then walk outside their home into the gray streets that slowly become brighter and more colorful as the family shares their plants and knowledge of gardening with neighbors and passersby. Our protagonist shows readers that perhaps we need to see, feel, touch, smell, and bear witness to just how we can change the world in ways big and small. Big and small actions might all be civic-minded and caring. Reul and our protagonist show us the inanity of a duality when it comes to responding to bad news, instead embracing their multiplicity.

As you open the book, Reul has sketched a series of illustrations of children with huge, expressive eyes. At the beginning of the book, these children appear static, each holding an object like a frisbee, guitar, or book. The children are despondent, clearly upset and unsure of themselves. At the end of the book, the contrast is striking. The children are more colorful; they are leaping, throwing things, smiling, handing out books, watering plants, and drawing stars. It is on these pages that Reul outlines her thesis: we must act, create, and revel in the many ways to share beauty and care with the world in the face of terrible times. We all experience this deep desire to help in the face of breaking, and horrific, news. How we do this and how we go about taking action of any size can and should include our children and students, who might be our best teachers for a productive and caring society focused on better tomorrows.

### **About the Author**

**Alexandra Panos** is an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She has felt herself become disillusioned by constant streams of breaking news, and, just like Reul's protagonist, has found comfort in trial, error, and seeking new ways to take action to make the world a more just place. Her research focuses on school-community partnerships, children's literature, critical literacy, and climate change literacy. She can be reached at [apanos@unomaha.edu](mailto:apanos@unomaha.edu).