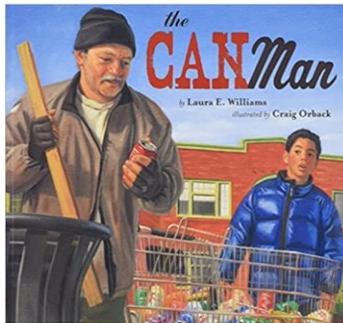


First Opinion: Creating Conversations on Empathy and Poverty

Williams, Laura E. *The Can Man*. Illustrated by Craig Orback. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2017. Print.

Kyungjin Hwang and Lenny Sánchez



Tim wants a skateboard more than anything for his birthday, but money is tight. Tim knows his family cannot afford it. So, he plans to earn money by collecting empty cans and turning them in for cash at the local redemption center. This book provides a peek into these experiences, and in the end, shows Tim holding a bag full of coins as he decides to do something else with this money. This moment leaves readers thinking about the kinds of choices Tim could make and why he would consider giving up something he really wanted. Although Tim is the central character in the story, readers also meet the Can Man (Mr. Peters). Readers find out he used to live in Tim's apartment building. After he lost his job at the auto body shop, he could not find new work and became homeless. Not too many details are disclosed about Mr. Peters, but it becomes clear he depends on the can redemption center funds for his survival.

This book is a reminder of our own childhoods when we desperately wanted to have something. We imagine readers can easily sympathize with Tim's desire to have something he always longed for and expect readers to eagerly applaud Tim for pursuing a path to purchase his long-awaited item. But, we appreciate that the author, Laura E. Williams, complicates this very touching storyline as Tim observes how his choices have consequences for Mr. Peters. In fact, Tim's jubilation eventually turns to concern. In this regard, this book teaches children to take

note of how one's decisions affect others and to be selfless, think beyond themselves and validate the process of having a changed heart.

This book undoubtedly includes positive messages about kindness, compassion, and sympathy, but we do question the way in which the author portrays the Can Man and depicts poverty in this book. While the nickname "the Can Man" nicely fits the storyline, we are concerned about the continual reference to this character as the Can Man and removes Mr. Peter's personhood and presents him as a distant "other." We do wish his name and identity were more explicitly honored throughout the story. In addition, although the book provides a reason (i.e., job loss) for Mr. Peters' displacement, it would have been wonderful if the author had shed more light upon dimensions of situational poverty, such as other factors and effects, to provide a broader picture of what this kind of poverty entails. Our concern is that readers may misinterpret or overlook important complexities for understanding how poverty exists. In this vein, we would encourage readers to extend the author's portrayal of Mr. Peters and ask questions such as, What might his current experiences be like? Where does he live? How could his situation be improved? Imagine if he were the central character in this story how much more could we learn from him? With these questions in mind, our hope is that readers could broaden the scope of challenges and possible solutions for understanding displacement and links between displacement and poverty.

Another point of review concerns the way the author expresses empathy. The book may give children a distorted perception of empathy, especially regarding the book's ending with the refurbished skateboard. While this book provides a happy ending, we are troubled it diminishes the worth of Tim's sacrifice and empathy and perpetuates the notion that when a person gives up something, they receive compensation or a reward in return. We feel a bit unsettled by this ending and suggest it presents a false portrayal of what empathy is. Rather, we would have preferred an ending that promoted empathy for the sake of empathy. We hope readers pause and ask questions about the real meaning of empathy even though they witness Tim receiving a wonderful, tangible gift.

Through the life of one young boy, Tim, this book can inspire young readers to think beyond themselves, consider the needs of others, and contemplate the ways they can help others. But let us not forget about Mr. Peters, who is the one most adversely affected by economic fragility, including how easily he can be further disenfranchised by others' "innocent" actions

(e.g., Tim's decision to collect recycle items). Without question, this book can lead to important conversations about topics such as poverty and empathy, but we recommend readers be ready to raise questions, read between the lines, and research these issues beyond the pages of the book.

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