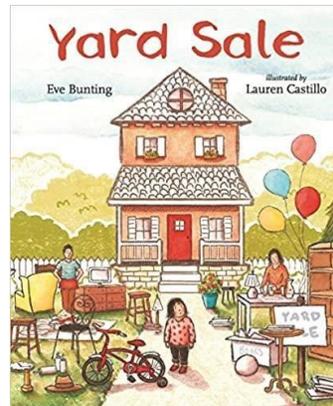


First Opinion: *Yard Sale* Simply Comes up Short

Bunting, Eve. *Yard Sale*. Illustrated by Lauren Castillo. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2015. Print.

Jennifer Conner



Eve Bunting's *Yard Sale*, brings to life the painful realities of financial hardship as seen through the eyes of a young child. With the help of its beautiful watercolor illustrations, the reader experiences the heartache and grief that young Callie endures as she watches in disbelief as complete strangers eagerly scour through Callie's family's belongings, including many of Callie's own toys, her bed and her bicycle, looking for the best bargains at her family's yard sale.

I commend Bunting, as well as the many children's authors whose books acknowledge and shine a light on the stark realities of difficult social issues. It is critically important that children be able to see their own lived experiences in the books that they read and that are read to them. When the only books we make available to children are those that consistently paint a picture of an idyllic (and unrealistic) world where hardship and suffering don't seem to exist (and there are certainly plenty of such books), we are, in essence, sending these children the message that there is something terribly wrong with their own worlds. It is a bit like spending too much time on *Facebook* and finding ourselves wondering, as we look at one utopianized account after another, why our lives just don't measure up. But, of course, it is because, like so many

children's books, those *Facebook* accounts don't mirror reality. And therein lies the reason why books like *Yard Sale* are so important. They don't force children to look at worlds that don't exist and pretend that they do.

In *Yard Sale*, Callie's family is selling their belongings because they need to move from a two-story house with a white picket fence and a large yard, as depicted by the illustrations, to a small apartment where there are no sidewalks to ride a bike (according to Callie's father), and Callie's bed will be one that pulls down from the wall during the night. While the reader never learns what has happened, it is clear that Callie's family has experienced a sudden change in their financial situation.

As much as I appreciate that *Yard Sale* addresses such a difficult theme, the way Bunting goes about it feels somewhat disingenuous. Bunting doesn't truly get at the heart of what children and their family's experience when financial crisis is at the forefront of their lives. This story just feels unconvincing and improbable in so many ways.

My first thought as I began to read this story was, who would put their child through such an event as experiencing this yard sale? While we don't know for sure how old Callie is, she couldn't be more than five or six years old as she is depicted in the illustrations. And with very few exceptions, the reader sees Callie looking confused and forlorn as complete strangers walk away with her family's possessions. I understand that Bunting wanted the readers to understand that Callie's family is losing virtually everything; however, the trauma of expecting a young child to watch as strangers walk away with the family's belongings brought to mind adverse childhood experiences (Felitti, V J et al.), which are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood that impact a child's social-emotional and physical health. And while some experiences, such as moving away from friends, losing one's possessions, changing schools, living a different lifestyle due to financial hardship, etc., all constitute ACES that children's books about financial hardship *should* help children talk about and explore, watching one's possessions be sold at a yard sale should not.

Also surprising to me was a scene in which Callie overhears a woman talking to Callie's mother about wanting to buy Callie's bed but asking that the price be lowered because "someone has put crayon marks on it" (Bunting unpagged). Callie, looking despondent off to the side,

wishes that she hadn't put those marks on the bed, which were there, the reader learns, "to show how many times [she] had read *Goodnight Moon*" (Bunting unpagged). It's not clear what purpose this scene plays in book. All I could think was how guilty this must have made Callie feel, as the result was that the buyer refused to purchase the bed for the asking price.

In conclusion, I appreciate Bunting's *Yard Sale* for what it is, a children's picture book that avoids being another *Facebook* account for children, leaving them wondering why everyone else's world seems, well, so much shinier than theirs. But *Yard Sale* still feels like it misses the mark. Rather than helping young readers explore, navigate, and deal with the emotions associated with a very real topic that so many of them will have experienced in one way or another, I fear that it will simply and unnecessarily exacerbate feelings of trauma and guilt.

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About The Author

Jennifer Conner was an Associate Professor of Language Education and Head of the Division of Education at Indiana University - Purdue University Columbus. Her reputation as a caring and critical teacher educator and supportive colleague and administrator was widespread.