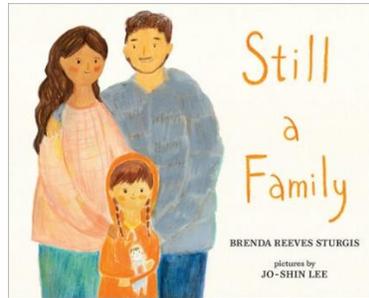


First Opinion: A Child's Perspective on Homelessness

Reeves-Sturgis, Brenda. *Still a Family*. Illustrated by Jo-Shin Lee. Chicago, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2017. Print.

Tammi R. Davis



This tenderly written picture book, *Still A Family*, by Brenda Reeves Sturgis, relies on a young girl's perspective of what it is like for her family to experience homelessness. The biracial preschooler (her mother is brown-skinned, while her father has a light complexion) shares her experiences which highlight a mixture of hardship and hope. The readers encounter a girl, her mother, and her doll Molly who are living in one shelter while their father lives in a different one.

The child's honest, simple and powerful perspective offers the reader a combination of sweet, hopeful moments along with the realistic challenges the family faces while living in a shelter. The stunning illustrations created with screen print techniques by Jo-Shin Lee resemble colorful crayon sketches that a child might make. The images and text combined tell a powerful story, yet I could even imagine the compelling images standing alone as a wordless picture book.

The text and images depict the family's experience as they try to maintain closeness despite the challenges of shelter life, which can be noisy, crowded, and provide little privacy. One powerful illustration shows a room full of cots and bunk beds accompanied by the text, "People snore. Subways roar. Buses, cars, and taxis honk. I toss and turn and try to fall asleep" (Sturgis unpagged). The family makes time to be together, spending time in the park and celebrating holidays. The repeated line "we are still a family" acts as a chorus in this book, returning to the theme that although not the living arrangements this family would choose, they are still a family.

As a literacy professor, I encourage my students to critically examine their classroom libraries to determine if the books available to their students are representative of the children in their classroom, their school, and their communities. Likewise, I encourage them to include books in their libraries and read alouds that can open opportunities for their students to consider, appreciate, examine, and discuss lives that are different from their own. These inquiries often spur classroom teachers into the realization that diversity is not only about the color of skin, but includes socioeconomic diversity. The book, *Still A Family*, offers a story about a family in poverty without using a deficit lens. This book could fill a void in many classroom libraries for children who have experienced homelessness, have a fear of homelessness, or those who can learn about its complexities through the voice of the child narrator.

By highlighting the voice of the child in the story the author leaves space for the reader to wonder and the book provides a launching point for a classroom discussion and inquiry. The author provides a list of national resources about homelessness at the end of the book, but I imagine students and adults would also wonder about and want to explore homelessness statistics and programs in their local contexts.

In conclusion, in this picture book *Still a Family*, Reeves-Sturgis addresses homelessness issues related to poverty by focusing on the ways a family navigates this experience. In the ending author note, the author, Brenda Reeves-Sturgis, explains that the idea of this book was conceived through an online discussion about how to explain homelessness to children. Her goal, so eloquently achieved, was to give the children in shelters a voice. Additionally, Reeves-Sturgis sought to touch “a million hearts” and “stir them to take a stand and make a difference” as she encourages her readers to find a way to make a difference and encourages readers, “whatever you can do will matter, and it will help” (Sturgis, Author’s Note).

Works Cited

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About the Author

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