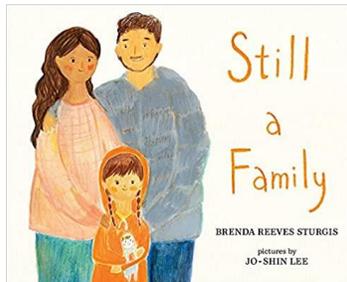


Second Reaction: *Still a Family*

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

Clara Thiry



The book *Still a Family* by Brenda Reeves Sturgis and illustrated by Jo-Shin Lee provides several points of access through which young readers, with guidance, may arrive at empathetic responses to issues around poverty. Throughout the book the author and illustrator scatter moments of familiarity, like breadcrumbs—subtle, numerous, and potentially delicious—reflections of home, a beloved toy, favorite outdoor activities, a fondness for birthdays and so on. These moments allow young readers a chance to connect with the little girl. Most young readers would be able to find at least one way to make a personal connection to her. This relatability provides a foundation on which children can begin to build their understanding and empathy as they dig deeper into this story of this homeless girl and her parents.

The obvious main theme of this story is that this family stays a family despite the physical separation and hardships of living in two separate shelters over many months. Their love for one another and connection with one another survives separation, new noises, hunger, rain, unemployment, and so on. That is an uplifting message. The author is matter of fact in her revealing about what life is basically like as a homeless family living in a shelter. There are few toys to play with, long food lines, rainy days spent outside, and lonely nights. These moments provide another point of access to the reader and the teacher to delve into and try to imagine what life would be like. Care would

need to be taken in having such conversations as our intent is to avoid objectifying someone's experience. We all have moments of these feelings throughout our lives.

In spite of the author's positive intentions and portrayal of a homeless family, I am concerned about the impact of the author's choices regarding how the girl is portrayed throughout the story. I was left longing for a more well-rounded, robust, complicated emotional experience of the girl. I think this would be more realistic as well and it would provide more of an opportunity for readers to experience a deeper level of empathy if there were moments of expressed sadness, frustration, or anger. Life is messy. Homelessness is scary. Separation is lonely. Hunger is tiring. Long food lines, a single cupcake, sharing your one toy, a lean-to in the rain are all potentially exhausting at times. I appreciate the family's connection with one another amid all of these challenges. Their happiness is commendable. However, the girl's insistence on trying to always smile amid hunger, loneliness, homelessness, separation is, on the surface, what some would call admirable. What a strong little girl oozing with grit! But I challenge you, as I would my young readers, are these moments NOT acceptable reasons for sadness, frustration, anger? Must we continue the narrative of smiling through the tough parts of life; through systemic injustice? Aren't inequities in our society deserving of our rage? In addition, our girls, especially, have heard too much in their lifetimes about smiling more.

There was an opportunity here for the author to use a more developed framework. Aren't there circumstances in which one does not always have to smile? In which one's heart could break and one could still persevere? How about when one is repeatedly separated from her father or has a grumbling stomach, has to continually share her one toy, to live at the mercy of the shelter's rules? What messages does this unchallenged positivity send to my students who may be dealing with poverty or homelessness or any other hardship? What would they think about themselves in comparison to her? This young child has every right to be scared, angry, frustrated, lonely, confused, and sad. She can be all these things AND be happy, playful, loving, hopeful. In my opinion this book missed an opportunity to model for young students that our emotional responses can be varied and contradictory at times. It IS important for one to have hope and happiness and safety and love AND one also has the right to rage. Smiling glosses over

the wide range of human emotion and denies the harsh inequities in our society. This family's happiness lulls us out of action and keeps us mired in complicity amid our comfort. How can we foster empathy and action if we only present those impacted as happy and smiling as they suffer?

At its core, this book addresses issues of poverty which is one of the many systems of oppression that is firmly entrenched in our society. The teacher would need to be able to hear and disrupt potential stereotypes and biases as discussions evolve. She needs to be able to look at this book with a critical lens in order to disrupt some harmful messaging, intentional or not (as discussed above). Therefore, I would suggest that a teacher NOT randomly grab this book off the shelf for a quick read aloud. Some care and planning should take place prior to reading this book and engaging students with it.

I am a veteran Kindergarten teacher who is committed to using a social justice framework for what and how we learn in our classroom; the materials we use, the images we see, and so on. I am committed to incorporating all voices and experiences into the fabric of our classroom and work hard to make sure I am not tokenizing or retraumatizing any group or experience. I aim to take an integrated approach to the learning throughout the year in accessible and respectful ways for all my students. We feed and clothe children at our school. We pay for field trips and school supplies, but I must confess that I have shied away from talking directly to my young students about issues of poverty. This is an exciting challenge for this teacher and one that I would approach with extreme care and self-examination.

Having said that, I am not sure this book would be my first choice of books to use with my Kindergarten class for the main reason of how the family is portrayed as being only happy in their poverty. For the sake of this article, if I were to use this book to try increasing empathy in my students regarding issues of poverty I would do so after we have worked on certain concepts and practices. We would come to this book having read many books about all kinds of families and having had discussions about what and who makes a family. We would have already discussed the different types of living spaces and communities. We would have a working understanding of the differences between needs and wants; what empathy is and how to show it. We would have ample practice having open-ended conversations. Prior to reading I would explicitly define the term shelter generally, and as used in the book.

I would read this book several times over a period of time. Each time with a different focus.

The first read through I could ask students to think of their home, their family and what they have in common with the main character. We would work on making a personal connection with the main character through discussion and/or drawings. The second read through I would ask them to pay extra attention to how their lives are different from the girl's and imagine if they were her. Imagine themselves in her shoes—leaving their home, having only one toy, being separated from a family member, being hungry, etc. We would discuss how some families are unable to get their needs met for a variety of reasons and may need help getting them met through a shelter and/or food kitchen, etc.

For reasons mentioned previously I would have to take a session to reread *Still a Family* and unpack the girl's emotional reaction to her situation. I think the portrayal of the happy family despite all the trauma is harmful and potentially reinforces that it is “okay” for them to live like that—after all they are happy! I would ask my students to listen for moments in the book where she confronts something unpleasant—the noisy dorm room, the long line for food, the tight shoes, etc. We would stop and imagine what additional feelings she may be having. We would talk about why we think she continues to try and smile throughout. We could have discussions as to why we think the author made that choice. Empathy without action, in my opinion, can be passive and sometimes self-indulgent. Empathy without action can center the empathic person instead of the one in need. I would extend our discussions around this book/these issues into some kind of action by my students and me. We could contact local homeless shelter, food bank, etc. to see what items they may need. Perhaps we could volunteer our time in the community garden at the food bank? We could identify some ideas from the book—toys, books, art supplies for kids in shelters? We could have discussions about how we treat each other in our classroom community based on what clothing students wear or don't, what toys they have or don't, and so on. Fostering empathy in young children towards issues of poverty is extremely important and delicate work. Teachers should choose books carefully and gather support in understanding their own biases and blind spots regarding this issue. We need to bring a critical eye to any book we read and especially to those that promote an incomplete and potentially harmful view of people struggling with homelessness

and poverty. Books read on one's own can have immense power. A book carefully read and reread, with support from an adult, can help young readers make more of an empathic connection to the characters in the book and in turn to people in their communities. These connections can only help to make the world more equitable and just.

About the Author

Clara Thiry is in her twenty-ninth year of teaching and currently teaches kindergarten in a southeast Michigan public school. She still finds her work a challenging and joyful privilege as she engages with young minds. She and her students are working together to make the world a better place for all.