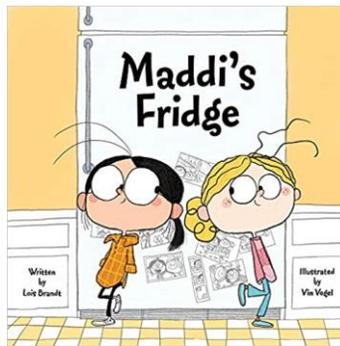


First Opinion: ...But not hungry: The complexity of keeping promises

Brandt, Lois. *Maddi's Fridge*. Illustrated by Vin Vogel. Brooklyn, NY: Flashlight Press, 2014. Print.

Kristine M. Lize



The authenticity of a child's concern and her internal struggle about how best to help a friend when she encounters economic fragility is brilliantly captured in Lois Brandt's children's story, *Maddi's Fridge*. This didactic text embodies the sentiment that children's literature "is a key site for transmitting values and educating children...it has a profound impact on socialization and society" (Hintz and Tribunella 34).

As a mother raising two elementary-aged daughters, I frequently watch them grapple with a complex mixture of emotions that surface when they encounter inequity in their lives. It could be recognition of a discrepancy of the amount of love and support in another's home, opportunities provided to friends, or living in conditions they believe to be subpart to their own. I've witnessed as intense heartbreak, concern, and call to action engrosses and consumes their thoughts; I see them struggle with the frustration of not having an outlet to offer meaningful support. It is in these moments that I wrestle internally with my perceptions of how to engage. I long to find the best way to provide them an understanding of the complex world in which we live while simultaneously offering them meaningful, rich ways to help others. *Maddi's Fridge* provides a tangible, realistic, and engaging experience for children to process the complexity of our world, an opportunity to internally struggle with the ideas and emotions that surface because of it, and suggests insightful ideas for their own future problem-solving.

Most impactful is the lesson *Maddi's Fridge* imparts on its readers. Throughout the story, the main character, Maddi asks her friend Sophia to keep Maddi's family's economic hardship a secret. Sophia repeatedly attempts to support her friend by bringing the family healthy foods she finds in her own stocked home, but nearly each time, Sophia fails as the food spoils before she can deliver it. Eventually, Sophia realizes that this problem is too large for her to handle on her own. She shares the secret of Maddi's nearly empty fridge with her mother and together they bring the family a generous food supply which results in the two families spending an afternoon together. Maddi expresses her chagrin saying "A promise is a promise," (Brandt 27) when she realizes the promise of silence has been broken, but Sophia renews their relationship saying "You're more important" (Brandt 27). With this simple response, Brandt ensures readers that the well-being of others supersedes a promise between friends. And that telling an adult when struggles occur is always a good idea.

A second, more subtle lesson, was the suggestion of a non-conforming definition of family and its impact on economic fragility. Both Sophia and Maddi's family offer a refreshing dichotomy of families who have financial security and families who do not. In the story, both households include a mother, daughter, and son. Equally impactful is the illustrator's decision to sketch both families as representatives of the same race. This depiction illustrates a lack of adherence to a traditional family structure and simultaneously suggests that the composition of families does not correlate with financial security.

Strikingly, the use of illustrations in *Maddi's Fridge* is nearly as important to the story as the tale itself. Using color, illustrator Vin Vogel creates a stark contrast between the image of Maddie's nearly empty crisp white fridge filled only with a single white milk carton and the one Sophia opens when she returns home. The fridge in Sophia's economically stable home is an image that spans the gutter; the contents offer a beautiful array of healthy, colorful, life-sustaining foods. Similarly, color is also used when depicting Sophia's return home from her visit with Maddi. She is pictured running by a grocery store while the sun sets; the store, full of food and like her path in life, is still warm with color. The complexity of a child struggling to determine how best to support a friend in need is reflected in the color and lack of it she encounters during her run, "the sun went down behind the buildings and took all the colors with it" (Brandt 7). Color, we can surmise, is not accessible to Maddi and her family at this time.

As I sat with my daughters, reading *Maddi's Fridge* in yet another attempt to support them as they grapple with the complexity of our world, I found that Brandt's thoughtfully written story coupled with Vogel's impactful, colorful illustrations provided an opportunity to safely and effectively engage with the complexities of economic fragility. In their reflection after our reading of *Maddi's Fridge* they expressed "that telling people to keep a promise that they don't have a lot of food is not a good thing to do...they might tell and help you. You'll be mad but not hungry" seems like a succinct and important lesson to me.

References

Brandt, Lois. *Maddi's Fridge*. Flashlight Press, 2014. Print.

Hintz, Carrie, and Eric Tribunella. *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction, second edition*. Broadview Press, 2019. Print.

About the Author

Kristine M. Lize is the Director of English Education at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. She is also the mother of two passionate elementary-aged readers who devour many books daily. Her research interests include the impact of diverse children's literature in teacher education programs, disciplinary literacy, and assessment-driven instruction.