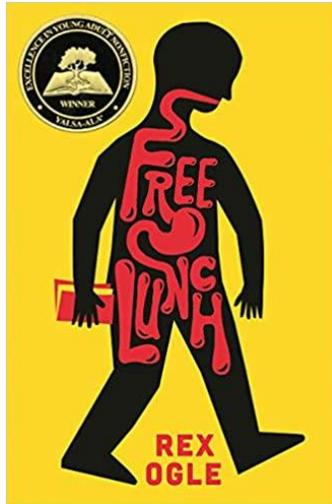


## First Opinion: Understanding Living in Poverty from an Adolescent's Perspective

Ogle, Rex. *Free Lunch*. New York: Norton Young Readers, 2019. Print.

*Emily A. Fisher*



In his captivating autobiography, Rex Ogle dives deeply into the complexities of what it truly means to receive free lunch and to live in poverty as a sixth grader. Reading *Free Lunch* provides adolescents, teachers, and readers to make an important leap from knowing to better understanding about what children living in poverty might experience at school and at home. As a young adolescent, Rex was encountering adolescent hardships centered on identity, beliefs, and ethics, as well as new middle schooler obstacles such as locker combinations, friendships, and being judged by others. Furthering the tension, Rex is constantly grappling with what it means to receive free lunch with his understanding that many students at his school have money. One specific tension illustrated is how his mother found ways to feed their family, and the toll of these efforts. Rex overheard his mom calling McDonald's to complain about a rude cashier; however, the incident never happened. Rex realizes his mother created false complaints to receive gift cards for future meals, and he realizes this has been happening for a while. At first, Rex worries the cashier could be fired. When Rex asks his mom about the call, she retorts that the cashier cannot be fired because no name was given, and that big corporate companies will

not lose anything from a few free meals. She sees it as getting even with the system. Rex feels disgusted.

At school, Rex battles the red notebook: the gateway and curse to Rex getting lunch. This notebook contains all the students who receive free lunch, and Rex must tell the cashier his name. However, it is never that simple, nor discreet as Rex hopes. The first day of school, Rex quietly explains to the cashier that he is on “the program” or “the thing” (Ogle 23). He works painstakingly to not actually utter “free lunch program” aloud. Unfortunately, the cashier is partially deaf and the cafeteria is rambunctious. She continually asks Rex to repeat what he is saying louder. Rex recognizes the restlessness of his hungry peers behind him in line and annoyingly snaps his name loudly at her. The cashier calls him out on being rude, picks up the red notebook, and finds his name while he uses all his willpower not to explode in frustration. Finally, she finds his name, checks it off, and Rex is released from the horrific encounter of getting his lunch for free. Rex is resolved to ensure this encounter does not happen again. He tries to be the last person in line, but then he has nowhere to sit. He tells the cafeteria worker exactly which page his name is on, but the pages stick together. Free lunch is never accessible without the price of disclosure.

Most importantly, readers gain insight into the fragile and delicate balance of living in poverty. Rex’s mom and stepdad are actively looking for work throughout the whole book. They want a safe, clean place for their family to live. At the beginning, they have a two-bedroom apartment. Rex has a sleeping bag in one room while his mom, stepdad, and stepbrother sleep in the other room. In order to do this to the best of their ability, sacrifices had to be made. Although there is some consistency in where they live, the family is evicted from their apartment and can only find free government housing.

Another example of this precarious balance is when Rex’s family periodically sells their possessions to a pawn shop when they need money to buy food or pay bills. Then they would race to buy their things back when they could afford it. They usually could get everything back, but not always. Rex was not completely aware of this practice until his mom forced his stepdad to take him. On this occasion, Rex had to contribute his boombox, one of the few possessions given to him by his biological father. However, when they return to the pawnshop Rex’s boombox has been sold and is forever gone. Rex feels devastated, and, to Rex’s surprise, his

stepdad bursts into tears because he feels horrible that Rex had to make this sacrifice. Although truly upset about it, Rex consoles his stepdad by saying it is just a boombox.

*Free Lunch* provides a unique avenue for exploring various facets of poverty and how it impacts people's lives. Rex's story made me feel anger, sorrow, and heartache as I remembered former students who may have similar experiences. Reading it will help readers develop more empathy for people living in poverty. Furthermore, it can provide a sense of connection for students living in similar circumstances. Although Rex feels like he is the only person who receives free lunch, his name is on page 14 in the red notebook. This means he was not the only student receiving free lunch, yet that was his perception. It is crucial that adolescents know they are not alone in the world and can see other stories with which they can identify.

Well designed for a novel study or small group reading, *Free Lunch* illuminates the complexities of poverty and the intersections of adolescents. Appropriate for youth and adolescents, there are topics such as domestic abuse, child abuse, and risk-taking adolescent behaviors that can be triggers for some readers. Before teaching or sharing *Free Lunch* with students, teachers should carefully read and consider how they will design meaningful learning experiences.

### **Works Cited**

Ogle, Rex. *Free Lunch*. New York: Norton Young Readers, 2019. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Emily A. Fisher** is a Doctoral Candidate at the University Nebraska - Lincoln and an instructional coach at a middle school. Before coaching, Emily taught language arts to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. She is passionate about K-8 literacy education, and she is particularly interested in the teaching of writing. Emily lives in Lincoln, NE with her husband, two children, and two dogs.