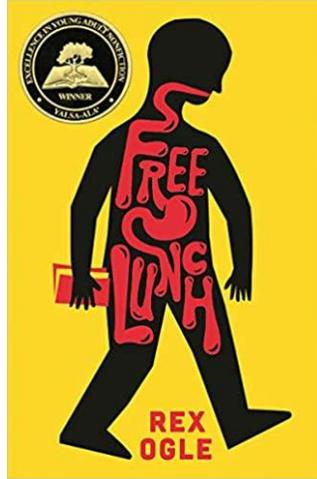


Second Reaction: *Free Lunch*

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

J. Joseph Prince



Rex Ogle recounts the first semester of his sixth-grade year in *Free Lunch*, a powerful and beautifully written memoir. Rex's home life is unstable and unpredictable: both his mother and stepfather are physically and emotionally abusive, food insecurity permeates the family's life, and shelter is occasionally temporary. Compounding these troubles, Rex must navigate the frequently cruel waters of middle school, from indifferent teachers to caustic classmates.

Ogle details the excruciating experiences of being a poor child in a fairly wealthy school district. One of few children on the free lunch program, he is thrust into a system that veritably broadcasts his socio-economic status. Furthermore, when his beloved Abuela provides food, it is either restricted or outright destroyed by his mercurial mother who refuses to be a charity case.

Ogle successfully captures the voice of his younger self, exhuming his feelings and filtering them through the lesson he's been forced to learn: the world will swallow you whole if you allow it. Peppered throughout the memoir are heartbreaking realizations: "...don't tell me love is free. 'Cause I know. *Nothing* in this world is free. Every little thing costs something. But for some reason, things cost a whole lot more when you're poor." (Ogle 13), and moments of self-loathing that point to the trauma he's endured, "No wonder God hates me. I am awful. Other kids at school are dressed like werewolves and Frankensteins and stuff, but those're just costumes. I really am a monster." (Ogle 94).

Perhaps the most striking quality of *Free Lunch* is the unflinching writing. His recounting is rendered in clear, uncluttered prose that reveals the horror lurking underneath. In that sense, *Free Lunch* is a master's class

in voice, guaranteed to resonate with its intended audience. Children navigate a world that adults frequently dictate in dichotomous terms: right/wrong and good/bad. They eventually understand the world doesn't operate in conditional syllogisms. Life is grey. Ogle frames this in a way that middle grade audiences will immediately understand. Ogle's mother, unpredictable and monstrous, is often humanized in ways that peel back her layers and expose her own trauma: "...the most colorful thing in the room are Mom's bruises" (Ogle77). These contrasts will surely ring true with many young readers.

In fact, Ogle seems acutely aware that readers of *Free Lunch* may be living in analogous hells. Poverty is a fairly common issue addressed in books for middle grade audiences, but rarely does it have the impact that *Free Lunch* achieves, largely due to the book's frank nature. Rather than inserting his adult self into the narrative, Ogle allows his younger self to absorb life lessons, trusting the reader to decode the central themes rather than spelling them out.

One of my duties at the university is to work with pre-service teachers (PSTs), both through library instruction and outreach. Many education students enrolled in the Honors College choose to take a one-credit class that I teach, *Heavy Medal: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Children's Book Awards*. Students in the Fall 2021 cohort read *Free Lunch*, and it was eye-opening to listen to the immediate connections they made to their future professions. A few PSTs were raised in abusive and/or poverty-stricken households, and had visceral responses to the book. The reading experience deepened their resolve to advocate for children living in these conditions. Nearly every PST felt that the memoir empowered them as educators - that they had previously been ignorant to impoverished children, and that the book raised their awareness. They felt committed to create a welcoming classroom where children felt safe, regardless of their home lives.

Free Lunch is dedicated to "every kid, whether they pay for their lunch or not" (unpaged), a dedication that drives the central message in the book. Every child carries with them experiences, wounds, joys, and traumas, and these are largely invisible to those around them. By acknowledging that which is seen and unseen, educators can empower all students in their classrooms to be courageous in their empathy.

To that end, *Free Lunch* is a book that should be on the shelves of every middle and high school library.

About the Author

J. Joseph Prince is a former middle school librarian, and currently serves as the Curriculum & Outreach Educator at Bowling Green State University. He is active in the field of children's librarianship and is currently serving on the 2022 Sibert Award committee.