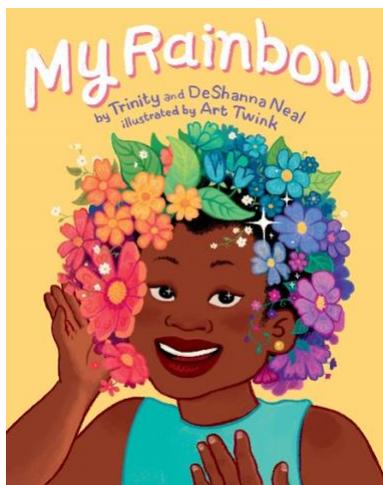


Second Reaction: Two Powerful Words: I'm Listening

Neal, Trinity and DeShanna. *My Rainbow*. Illustrated by Art Twink. New York:

Kokila, 2020. Print.

Breanya Hogue



Trinity and DeShanna Neal's picture book, *My Rainbow*, was a breath of fresh air for so many reasons. First and foremost, it was great to see not only a Black child, but a child with autism, and a transgender child represented in a story. As a children's book author and former elementary educator, the first thing that captured my attention were the vibrant illustrations and colors. I absolutely loved them! The character and setting features (such as the book shelf and walls in the home, the hairstyles, and the hair store) captured the essence and aesthetic that set the stage for the book.

When I began the story, I instantly felt at peace. The authors did an amazing job depicting the generalized preferences of children with autism such as calmness, and peaceful vibes. The illustrations again captured this through the relative playing his cello and the plants all around. I immediately remembered a student from my early teaching career that would cover his

ears in frustration from the loudness in our classroom. Over time I learned strategies to best accommodate him in the whole class setting.

On the next page, I was again captivated by the illustrations for the imagination scene. On this page was the first time Trinity/Trin is referenced with the pronoun ‘their.’ “*Their sparkly shirt glittered like stars.*” (Later the store worker wears a nametag with their pronouns They/Them displayed). It can be possibly overlooked and unnoticeable by most children (and even adults), but at that moment I knew that there was more to what made Trinity unique. As the story progressed, I loved the comparison of the doll’s hair to Trinity’s recognition of her own hair. Last semester, during a final presentation, one of my students “came out” as transmasculine in a diversity course I teach. They explained the term and the pronouns and new name they preferred to be acknowledged by. The other students asked a few questions and I later shared this update and a helpful link (<https://www.healthline.com/health/transmasculine>) with our faculty and staff. Trinity reminded me of how this student expressed their feelings of having long hair and being referred to as a woman. Over the semester I noticed that the student cut their hair shorter and shorter each session.

Perhaps the most powerful piece in this picture book occurs during the dialogue between Trinity and her mom. It is at this moment that Trinity’s mom realizes that maybe instead of quickly trying to reassure her child by sharing about her own and other women’s short hairstyles (to attempt to make her feel better about theirs), that it is probably best to allow her transgender daughter to communicate her feelings. Though rooted in love, the mom’s attempt to reassure and try to explain short hair variations to her transgender child reminded me of how sometimes society tries to quickly cover up the deeper complexities that transgender individuals encounter when it comes to expression, sexuality, and gender issues.

In this dialogue, Trinity's mom says, “I’m listening.” These are two powerful words that we all need to truly hear and practice with others. Instead of listening to fix or listening to talk or debate, we need to just *hear* others. Just *listen*.

Furthermore, this story is a great book for teaching empathy. The mirror depiction in the illustrations when Trinity was explaining her feelings of being a transgender girl with short hair versus long hair and how society sees her truly aligned with the text on that page and brought her emotions to life through her body language and the facial expressions.

The intersectionality of race and sexuality come to life through the hair store scene and discussion between Mom and Lucien about Trinity's hair. Black people take great pride in our hair and expressing ourselves through various hairstyles. The authors and illustrators truly nailed this understanding in my opinion! The metaphor between Trinity's "very own rainbow" to her unique wig is made after Mom can't seem to find a pre-made wig style that captures her daughter's essence. Again, the process of Mom watching an online video to self-instruct herself on how to make a wig showcases the innovativeness of Black people and their determination to create what they need if they can't find it readily available. It also displays the love between a Black mother working to turn nothing into something (in the wee hours of the night) to make their child happy, like so many Black mothers (even my very own) have done.

Overall, personally I would recommend this book. This is a "sensitive" topic to many and I discovered this after I asked a friend if I had permission to read it to her and her children. She asked first what it was about and I gave her a very brief synopsis. She was hesitant, but agreed. As I read the story, the children (middle school daughter, mid elementary daughter, and upper elementary son) loved the illustrations and were excited to read the story based on the cover. The oldest daughter had background knowledge of autism. They did not pick up on the child identifying as transgender until they came out in the story and stated it. The oldest daughter questioned in confusion, "Wait, what? How did we get here?" I responded by asking her if she knew what that meant. She did and was able to explain accurately. The youngest didn't, but as I continued the story they were more into the hairstyles and Trinity finding hair that made her happy. They said they thought it was, "cute." The son missed the part of the story where Trinity stated she was transgender, but stated he was happy she found hair to make her happy.

The mother asked if she could be honest (when we debriefed one-on-one) and said she thought the book would be appropriate for a transgender child, but inappropriate for a school setting or to be read by a teacher in a classroom. She shared about having a relative that was LGBTQ+ growing up during her childhood. I questioned if she felt it would have helped if he and his peers had a book that represented them and that other students could learn from. She said "no" and I think many parents feel the same way. While I can respect this view, as a social justice advocate I cannot agree.

As a social justice educator and researcher, I do understand the importance of the representation of diverse characters and voices in children's books. I understand the importance

of teaching and discussing various social issues in schools to help teach tolerance and diversity so that students are aware and aren't ignorant of the complexities that others face, some that may very well be represented within their families, schools, and classrooms. Also, while reading this story I thought of parents like athlete, Dwayne Wade, and his transgender daughter, Zaya, and how a book like this could be a light to transgender children to see themselves. It could be used as a resource for families struggling with how to best hear and support their children. As Bishop emphasizes when discussing the importance of mirrors and windows,

So, we should choose our literature wisely. If we want our children to know what we value, we must present them with literature that reflects our values. If we believe in the importance of a pluralistic society, we will present them literature from diverse cultures, reflecting linguistic variety (10).

In closing this book is a refreshing, simple, and necessary story that should be heard by all if we truly value the representation of the varied backgrounds of our youth and the communities we serve.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Breanya Hogue is an assistant professor at Purdue University. Her research interests include communities of practice, children's literature, culturally proactive pedagogy, and maximizing out of school time through literacy engagement. Before her current position, Breanya taught various literacy methods and elementary education courses as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Indianapolis, IUPUC, and as a Graduate Associate Instructor at IUB. She

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