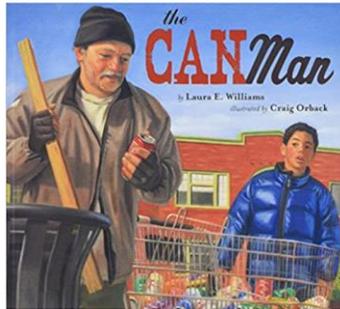# Second Reaction: Developing Empathy through *The Can Man*

Williams, Laura E. *The Can Man*. Illustrated by Craig Orback. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2017. Print.

Caven Belville

The book *The Can Man* by Laura E. Williams demonstrates empathy through the issues of poverty during the entire story. It begins with a homeless man, the Can Man, looking through different bins of garbage looking for different cans he can sell for a few cents. The Can Man then runs into a young boy, Tim, who lives in the apartment complex the Can Man used to live in. After talking with the Can Man for a little bit, Tim gets the idea to start collecting his own cans to save up enough money to buy himself a skateboard for his birthday since his parents could not afford it right then. Tim saves up enough tin can money to be able to afford his own skateboard, but after talking to the Can Man some more Tim decides it would be a good idea to give him all of the money he saved up for his skateboard so the Can Man could buy himself a new winter coat before it starts to snow. This story is constantly demonstrating empathy through issues of poverty by having Tim understand that his parents cannot afford a gift for him right now due to extra bills, so, even at his young age, Tim decides he is going to work for what he wants. It also shows empathy at the end when Tim realizes that the Can Man could use the extra money more than he. The story also ends on this same note when Tim gets up on his birthday, and to his own surprise, the Can Man bought Tim his own skateboard.

When engaging young readers with a book like this, it is important to relate the story back to the readers. When it comes to a topic like poverty, you don't want to relate that aspect of the story back to the students; therefore, I would share it by asking if they ever worked for something they really wanted, or if they have ever given something to someone that needed it more than they did. With sensitive topics like that, it is important to not stray on that idea of relating it to people. I also think it would be important to try and relate it back to my life by bringing up times I worked for my own things, so the readers don't take all of that pressure of relating these topics back to themselves.

This book lends itself to young readers by having one of the main characters be a young kid. That is something young readers would naturally gravitate to. It also lends itself to young readers because the homelife Tim lives in this story is the homelife many of your students might be living in as well. This story from the very beginning to the end can relate to a lot of young readers in a classroom.

To extend the potential of this book with the understanding of poverty, I think it would be appropriate to read this story to your students when the topic of poverty and different economic levels are being taught in the classroom. This would also be a good book to read to young readers when talking about the pandemic and how it has impacted people's lives. You could relate to extra bills coming in and parents not being able to afford them because of the pandemic. Talk about how many people have possibly lost their jobs. The *Can Man* does not have a house anymore and how that has been happening in real life to people during this pandemic.

When working with this text, the theme and text stood out to me. The author did a really good job setting the theme for this story. She did a really good job making you feel empathy for these characters in the story, but also showed a side of never giving up for something you want or need; a good lesson to teach young readers. It shows that even during these hard times we are facing, especially now, it is always crucial to help out others even if you need help yourself. The plot of this story would be a good one for young readers as the lesson it is trying to teach is a lesson we all need to learn.

About the Author

Caven Belville is a pre-service teacher in the elementary education program at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln.