

Second Reaction: Should We Really Talk about This?

Yehudi Mercado. *Chunky*. Illustrated by Yehudi Mercado. New York, NY:
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Vulnerability and the ability to overcome adversity often leverage itself as the greatest asset in a truly moving story that captures the heart of children. Pertaining uncontrollable issues with one's body, Raina Telgemeier recently enthralled Upper Elementary and Middle Grade students with Graphic Novels addressing anxiety and losing one's front teeth. Yehudi Mercado, in his book *Chunky*, follows recent authorship with a glimpse of his childhood dealing with his own body issues.

The three main issues of the body Mercado highlights in his book are: his surgery removing one of his lungs, being overweight, and being accident prone. The book begins with Hudi (Yehudi) at the doctor's office being told he is overweight. The doctor gives a recommendation to his parents to have him play sports to lose weight. The plot takes Hudi through five different sports: baseball, soccer, tennis, swimming and football. As each chapter

unfolds, he works with his imaginary friend, Chunky, through the challenges his medical issues present. His true ambition in life, though, is to be a comedian. For this reason, he averts any negative attention from his medical issues into humor.

Later in the book, he takes off his shirt to go swimming. When his peers notice his scar, they give him a nickname and begin to think he is cool. With this popularity, he is invited to a friend's house where he begins to fall into the pressure of changing his identity to be cool. Chunky disappears from his consciousness until he has a moment playing football where he sees an old friend. After Hudi remembers his friend, Ronald, who was nice to him from the beginning, he decides that his competitiveness got the best of him and chooses to help his friend up. He ends his football chapter by stepping into a helmet on accident and dancing it off.

To see how students engaged with this book, I selected a variety of students to participate in two guided reading groups. After previewing the book, the students were given the option to read the book and participate, or read another book of their choice. Seven students chose to read the book and six students declined. The students were given four weeks to read the book, but read the book in two. The seven students who read the book began talking with their peers about how much they enjoyed the book, and others would ask if they could read it too. Those who declined to read the book appeared to be filled with regret.

After reading the book, the students were asked a series of questions regarding the theme of the body. When asked about Hudi specifically, they pointed out his lung infection, being overweight, his love for acting and making people laugh, and his routine of getting hurt. The students were quick to talk about his love for comedy and imaginary friend, but cautiously and delicately spoke of his medical issues. Next, the students were asked about the appropriateness of Hudi's response to his medical issues. One student had a positive perspective stating that "people are different", while others thought the response inappropriate. The final question asked was if people should talk about these types of body issues openly. One student said to talk about them, another said not to, and the others said to talk about these issues privately with parents or a doctor.

Yehudi Mercado's book, *Chunky*, does a great job of engaging young readers with challenging topics. Using sports and friendships as a relatable mantra throughout the book, students have the commitment to read through the challenges of being overweight and accident prone. The story has a great message for students to stay true to themselves, their hobbies and

friends. However, the one challenge this book faces is the appropriateness of avoiding health issues through the avenue of humor. Humor is another engaging factor in children's literature, but are we inviting the appropriate response to health issues? How students associate with this behavior may impact the fidelity of this book toward a positive message for young readers.

About the Author

Seth Hall is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Language and Literacy program at the University of South Carolina. He also teaches 5th grade at a public school in the surrounding area. His research interests include Socio-Cultural Literacies, Multiliteracies and Equity Pedagogies.