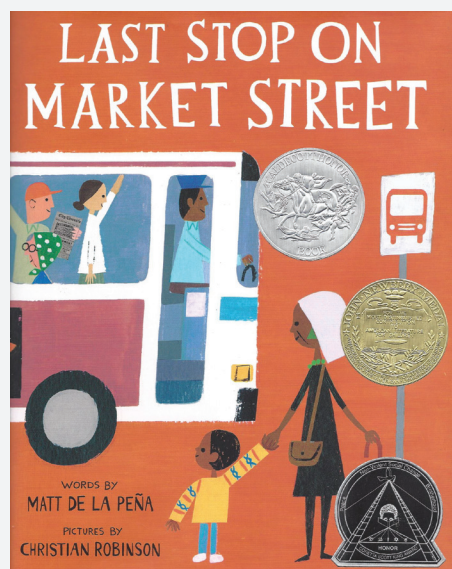


First Opinion: A Witness to Beautiful

de la Peña, Matt. *Last Stop on Market Street*. Illustrated by Christian Robinson, G. P. Putman's Sons Books, 2015.

Linda Coggin



Rarely has a picture book won the Newbery Award, but Matt de la Peña's *Last Stop on Market Street*, did it in 2016. Additionally, Christian Robinson's illustrations were recognized by receiving honor awards in the Caldecott and Coretta Scott King Illustration categories. Both author and illustrator were able to weave multiple layers of meaning into Matt de la Peña's remarkable debut picture book. He has written young adult books that overtly deal with race and social class; however, he wanted this picture book to include a diverse storyline that was not explicitly focused on diversity (de la Peña).

In de la Peña's Newbery acceptance speech, the author says that while CJ's, the main character, nana is urging him to see the beauty in the world around him, she is "also steering him toward something more fundamental—she's teaching CJ to see himself as beautiful, to see himself as worthy." Matt de la Peña reveals more than a relationship between a young boy and his nana, or a bus ride to the other side of town, or about wanting what you don't have, even though all of those things happen. We, the readers, along with CJ, are being invited to see all of those things and ourselves with new eyes.

The story begins as young CJ and his nana set out from church into a day where the “air smelled like freedom but it also smelled like rain” (unpaged), foregrounding the message that there is more than one way to view our world. As they make their way to the bus stop, CJ wonders, even laments, why they have to wait for the bus, why they don’t have a car, and why he always has to make this trip after church. CJ seems to look and long for another way to be in the world—waving to his friend who gets to ride in a car, watching neighborhood boys on their bikes, and envying the teens listening to music he cannot hear.

Christian Robinson’s simply drawn geometric illustrations bring the story to life and are reminiscent of the earlier picture book illustrations of Ezra Jack Keats, who introduced urban lifestyles and diverse characters in books for young readers in the 1960s. Robinson’s style, like Keats, is almost childlike—with geometric shapes—angular bodies, rounded treetops, and rectangular buildings in colorful rows. The setting for *Last Stop on Market Street* is an urban landscape with multifamily housing, cityscapes, and city buses that hold communities of people who are colorful, too. The characters aptly represent the variety of people and lifestyles found in the contemporary city: a tattooed body, a tattered old lady, a man with a white cane, boys jumping curbs on their bikes, and the line at the local soup kitchen.

Last Stop on Market Street reflects a world that must be closely observed, intentionally noticed, to fully appreciate its beauty. Matt de la Peña’s language captures the music and poetry of the city and attentiveness to the world. Nana encourages CJ to imagine the ways the trees use their roots to get water, saying, “see that big one drinking through a straw” (unpaged), to see their “bus that breathes fire” (unpaged), to see the world in front of him with his ears, nose, and eyes. But young CJ doesn’t see.

Once he is in the middle of the bus ride, CJ closes his eyes to feel the live music of the man with the guitar on the bus, feeling the magic that is inside of himself that alters how he sees the magic of the natural world around him. What CJ sees changes visibly through Christian Robinson’s illustration as well. The turned page is saturated with vibrant color—orange and blue and purple, black and white and yellow. “And in the darkness” of his closed eyes, CJ sees the beauty of the world that surrounds him and his “chest grew full” (unpaged).

When CJ and his nana reach the last stop on Market Street, he sees his world. As CJ and his nana get off the bus, the view changes—“crumbling sidewalks and broken down doors, graffiti tagged windows and boarded up store” (unpaged).

That is when CJ asks, “How come it’s always so dirty over here?” (unpaged). His nana wisely answers, “Sometimes when you’re surrounded by dirt, CJ, you’re a better witness for what’s beautiful” (unpaged). He wondered how his nana always found beautiful where he never even thought to look. Being a witness to what is beautiful changes what and how CJ sees—“the broken streetlamps still lit up bright and the stray-cat shadows moving across the wall” (unpaged).

In the end, CJ and his nana spot familiar faces in line for the soup kitchen's Sunday meal. The reader must look carefully at the pictures to see that CJ and his nana might be the servers instead of the served, even though that doesn't matter. CJ is glad they came.

Work Cited

de la Peña, Matt. "2016 Newbery-Caldecott-Wilder Banquet: Matt de la Peña Newbery Speech." *YouTube*, uploaded by Association for Library Service to Children, 26 July 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1_7_cw4MkQ.

About the Author

Linda Coggin is an assistant professor at King University in Bristol, Tennessee, where she teaches courses in children's literature, literacy theory and development, and teaching methods. She earned her PhD in Literacy, Culture, and Language at Indiana University in Bloomington. Currently, she reads each week with children at a local elementary school to share and experience the power of stories in our lives. Her research interests explore the ways in which telling and imagining personal stories create humanizing pedagogies that foster more equitable participation and make sense of learning in all levels of classrooms.