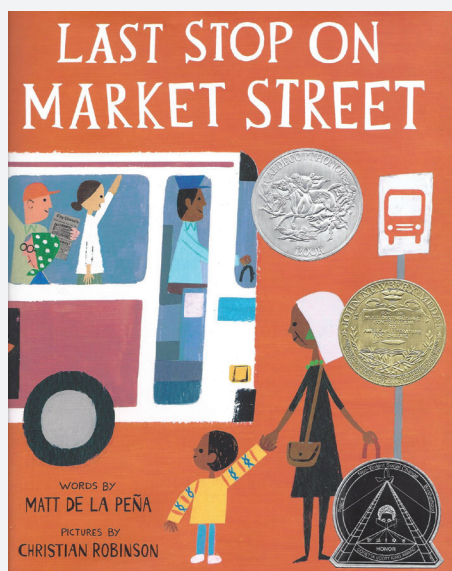


Second Reaction: Seeking Out Beauty in the Everyday

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

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Last Stop on Market Street is a story of a young boy and his nana on a vibrant Sunday afternoon bus ride. Though we do not know their intended destination until the very end of the story, the bold colors and musical use of language keep the reader engaged in the present moment, a subtle lesson and reminder about gratitude embedded into the story.

I introduced the book to my daughters, aged five and three. My five-year-old is enrolled in dual language (English/Spanish) immersion school; thus, she was excited to hear me read the author's name, Matt de la Peña. "Hey! That sounds Spanish!" and then, "Look—there's the ñ!" In addition to her recognition of a Latino author, I was drawn to the normed representation of racial diversity—Christian Robinson beautifully illustrates people of all colors, a quality still desperately wanting in children's literature as a whole.

Unlike many children's books, the storyline is somewhat unpredictable. Readers could predict that CJ and nana are taking the bus to the book title's namesake, but we are not given many clues about the significance of the last stop on Market Street nor the purpose of their ride. It isn't until the last page of the story that readers learn that CJ and nana have come to volunteer at a soup kitchen, but we only infer this through pictures; the term "soup kitchen" is never used. This provided an opportunity for my daughters and me to talk about the context and circumstances for a soup kitchen—how some communities offer food to people who are

experiencing difficult times and need a safe place to stay and a healthy meal to eat. My five-year-old asked if some of the people without homes went to the soup kitchen, referring to people whom she has seen carrying “homeless” signs on the streets of our city and expressing the sense of empathy the story elicits from its readers.

Throughout the story, CJ charms the reader as a relatable kid who notices what other kids have and somewhat rhetorically complains about what he doesn’t have in comparison. When two boys with an iPod and headphones board the bus, CJ longingly whines, “Sure wish I had one of those” (de la Peña unpagged). My three-year-old giggled, “Silly CJ.” Nana lovingly scolds CJ, redirecting him to look around and see what he *does* have. “You got the real live thing sitting across from you. Why don’t you ask the man if he’ll play us a song?” (de la Peña unpagged). This introduces one of the most impressionable scenes of the book, by my five-year-old daughter’s account: a musician singing and playing his guitar for all the people on the bus to enjoy. As the music starts to play, CJ takes the advice of another passenger, a blind man, who offers, “To feel the magic of music, I like to close my eyes” (unpagged). So with eyes closed, CJ is “lifted . . . out of the bus . . . lost in the sound and the sound gave him the feeling of magic” (unpagged). This led my five-year-old to reflect back upon the conclusion of the book, when prompted to think about how CJ thought and felt about coming to work at the soup kitchen. “I bet CJ feels happy, just like when he was listening with his eyes closed on the bus.” Comparing the two pages of the story, she offered further rationale, “See? The colors are the same, too, so I think that’s how he feels.”

Our family lives in the suburbs of a large city, and our personal cars are our most-relied-upon mode of transportation. We’ve taken some New York City subway rides during vacation, but the closest experience my five-year-old could relate to the story’s bus ride was her own school bus ride. Yet, CJ’s story and its appeal stayed with my daughters, even weeks after we had read *Last Stop on Market Street* together. While running some errands downtown one day, we passed a bus stop with a parked a city bus in front of it. My three-year-old pulled on my hand to stop me and excitedly exclaimed, “Mama! There’s CJ’s bus!” which incited my five-year-old to plead, “Can we ride CJ’s bus?” To me, this speaks to another aspect of the book’s excellence in storytelling and illustration—my young daughters connected to the character of CJ and his experiences. Beyond the book’s lessons of gratitude, humility, and service to one’s community, CJ has prompted them to notice more about the surroundings of their immediate worlds. In this surprising way, CJ’s ride to the “last stop” has led and inspired me to bring my children to their first stop along our city’s public transportation route.

About the Author

Michelle C. S. Greene is a teacher educator at Indiana University’s School of Education, where she earned a PhD in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education. Her work in teaching, research, and service focus on the learning possibilities that emerge when critical literacies and critical multiculturalism are embraced and enacted.