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UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Raymond P. Kettel

"My dad and I live in an airport. That's because we don't have a home and the airport is better than the streets. We are careful not to get caught."

The above is taken from a newly published children's picture book *Fly Away Home*, by Eve Bunting. In this story a homeless preschool boy and his father are able to survive living in an airport terminal because they are clever enough not to be noticed by security. Other homeless who enter the terminal, like a woman who pushes her belongings in a grocery cart, are not so fortunate.

Most children are becoming more aware of homelessness through the news on television and radio and in the newspaper. Some have a better understanding of this crisis situation from family members and friends who volunteer their time to help feed and provide temporary shelter for the homeless. It is not unusual for children to accompany parents or other adult volunteers who work through their church, synagogue, school, or other charitable organizations such as COTS, MATTS, MCREST, and the Salvation Army.

In the past few years, several children's books on the homeless have been published, providing another means by which young people can better understand and appreciate the sufferings of those who must live without sufficient food, clothing, and shelter. These selections include picture story books written for younger children and novels and information books for older children. The characters from these books are examples of the unfortunate who suffer the pain and despair of the nation's homeless. Some turn to substance abuse, suffer mental disabilities, or become victims of those who prey on the homeless. The stories and information from these selections will provide children with a better understanding of why some people become

homeless. Although many would prefer to think about more pleasant topics, these books may encourage children to appreciate their own life situations, help them form more positive attitudes toward those who are homeless, and provide them with suggestions on how they can help those who are in need. Teachers and parents may wish to read one or more of the following selections to their children and discuss the stories and information as the books are shared. Some of these titles are available at libraries, and they can be ordered through neighborhood book stores. For information on helping the homeless in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties, call Tel-Help 1-800-552-1183. For all other locations in Michigan, contact your local United Way Agency.

Picture Books

Barbour, Daren. *Mr. Bow Tie*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (0-15-256165-X), 1991.

Mr. Bow Tie is a homeless war veteran who never speaks. He is reunited with his parents through the help of caring children who befriend him. (Ages 5 through 10.)

Bunting, Eve. (Illus. by Ronald Himler.) *Fly Away Home*. Clarion Books (0-395-55962-6), 1991.

A homeless preschooler shares with the reader his experiences living in an airport terminal with his father and other homeless people. (Ages 5 through 10.)

DiSalvo-Ryan, DyAnne. *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*. Morrow Junior Books (0-688-09165-2), 1991.

Elderly Uncle Willie invites his little nephew to spend time with him helping serve those in need at the neighborhood soup kitchen. Readers will see how many volunteers can make a difference for those who are hungry. (Ages 5 through 10.)

Guthrie, Donna. (Illus. by Donna Hockerman.) *A Rose for Abby*. Abigdon Press (0-687-36586-4), 1988.

After little Abby finds a way of helping a homeless woman who wanders near her father's church, Abby's father encourages others to volunteer time and talents to feed the many homeless in their community. (Ages 4 through 8.)

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Wine, Jeanine. *Silly Tillie*. Good Books (0-934672-62-8), 1989.

There was a time when Mr. Slotman would not even allow homeless Tillie to be warmed by heat of the dryers in his laundromat. Then one day Tillie surprises everyone when she is the only one who comes to his rescue. (Ages 5 through 10.)

Fiction

Carlson, Natalie Savage. *The Family Under the Bridge*. Harper and Row (0-06-440250-9), 1958.

Armand is a Parisian gentleman who lives on the streets of Paris with other homeless. He surprises everyone with his willingness to change his carefree way of life by reaching out to a homeless mother and her children. (Ages 9 through 13.)

Corcoran, Barbara. *Stay Tuned*. Atheneum (0-689-31673-9), 1991.

What happens when a group of homeless individuals from preschool to eighteen meet while they are trying to find a home for themselves? With the help of some caring adults, these young people succeed in building a life at a camp facility in rural New Hampshire. (Ages 11 through 15.)

Fox, Paula. *Monkey Island*. Orchard Books, (0-531-05962-6), 1991.

Readers will experience what it is like to be abandoned by a parent and forced to live on the streets of New York City. Thanks to compassionate homeless living in a nearby park, eleven-year-old Clay has a place to sleep as he searches the streets for his mother. Although Clay is reunited with his mother, others who are chased from their cardboard shelters are not so fortunate. (Ages 10 through 13.)

Grove, Vicki. *The Fastest Friend in the West*. G. P. Putman's Sons (0-399-22184-0), 1990.

For overweight Lori, it is difficult enough to be accepted, but when Vern, a new girl in her class, begins to associate with Lori, life becomes even worse. Although she has more material things than Vern could ever hope for, it is homeless Vern that teaches her the true meaning of friendship. (Ages 11 through 13.)

Hahn, Mary Downing. *December Stillness*. Avon Flare (0-380-70764-0), 1988.

At first it is Kelly's high school homework assignment that causes her to converse with homeless Mr. Weems, who spends his daytime hours in the public library staring at books about the Vietnam War. Her interest changes as she tries to befriend the Vietnam vet, a social outcast. Older students will witness how members of the community can be so unsympathetic to the homeless. (Ages 12 through 15.)

Hamilton, Virginia. *The Planet of Junior Brown*. Macmillan Publishing Co. (0-02-742510-X), 1971.

Two teens, Buddy Clark and Junior Brown, hide out in a secret room of the school with the help of the custodian. When they are caught, 300-pound Junior Brown, whose life had become unbearable because of an overprotective mother, becomes more desperate than ever. Homeless Buddy Clark, who spends his time reaching out to other homeless New York boys, is the only one who is able to reach Junior Brown. (Ages 12 through 15.)

Harris, Mary. *Come the Morning*. Macmillan/Bradbury Press (0-02-742750-1), 1989.

While desperately searching for their father in another city, thirteen-year-old Ben, his mother, and younger siblings live in a cheap hotel, sleep on the floor of a church, and spend a night in a cardboard box community. Although their situation becomes almost hopeless, the Salvation Army makes it possible for the family to begin a new life. (Ages 12 through 15.)

Holman, Felice. *Secret City USA*. Charles Scribner's Sons (0-684-19168-7), 1990.

Living in a crowded apartment causes Benno and his friend Moon to explore a deserted home in a section of the city where most dwellings have been leveled. After turning this dilapidated home into a shelter for many of the homeless children who live in their community, the boys are ordered to leave the site. All is not lost, as the boys are invited to serve

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on a new city commission to help the homeless. (Ages 11 through 15.)

Holman, Felice. *Slake's Limbo*. Macmillan (0-689-71066-6), 1974.

Imagine being a young teenage boy without parents and having a guardian who does nothing to care for you. Slake finds his only recourse is to live in the New York underground subway system. Readers will marvel at Slake's ingenuity in making an honest living in an environment that many would find hostile. (Ages 10 through 14.)

Holman, Felice. *The Wild Children*. Puffin (0-14-031930-1), 1983.

What was it like in 1920s Moscow when thousands of children were left homeless after the arrest of their parents? This is the story of Alex, whose only means of survival is to join one of the many homeless gangs of children who live in constant fear of the secret police. Through their struggle to stay alive, Alex and his new friends experience the value of trust and perseverance. (Ages 11 through 15.)

Howe, James. *Dew Drop Dead: A Sebastian Barth Mystery*. Atheneum (0-380-71301-2), 1990.

While exploring on their bicycles in a small New England town, three junior high youngsters discover the body of a man in a vacant inn. After learning that the victim was a young vagrant, the children become interested in serving the many homeless in their community. Readers of suspense will enjoy solving the mystery of the death of this homeless man. (Ages 9 through 13.)

Jones, Adrienne. *Street Family*. Harper and Row (0-06-02350-9), 1987.

The teenagers in this story survive their experiences with child abuse and become part of a family unit while making their home under a Los Angeles freeway. Other characters represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds and include Nellie, the typical bag lady, and Doc, a Vietnam vet. Older readers will appreciate how those who are homeless are still able to reach out to others who are in the same situation. (Ages 13 and up.)

Paulsen, Gary. *The Crossing*. Dell (0-440-20582-4), 1987.

What happens when an alcoholic Vietnam vet from El Paso, Texas, begins to take an interest in a homeless teenager who lives just across the Mexican border? Teenagers will want to find out if Manny Bustos ever succeeds in crossing the Rio Grande River to escape his life of terror on the streets of Juarez, Mexico. (Ages 13 and up.)

Pinkwater, Jill. *Tails of the Bronx*. Macmillan Publishing Co. (0-02-774652-6), 1991.

Loretta, her brother, and several friends become involved with a neighborhood witch who helps them solve a mystery of the disappearing cats on their block. What role does a teenage girl living with an elderly homeless woman play in solving this puzzle? Young readers will have a good understanding of what life is like growing up in a section of New York City called the Bronx. (Ages 9 through 13.)

Sachs, Marilyn. *At the Sound of the Beep*. Dutton Children's Books (0-525-44571-4), 1990.

Mathew and Mathilda have no idea that they will be living with the homeless for a week when they run away during their parents' pending divorce. Before they return home from living in Golden Gate Park, they have become part of a mystery involving the murders of homeless people. (Ages 10 through 13.)

Spinelli, Jerry. *Maniac Magee*. Little, Brown and Company (0-316-80722-2), 1990.

Jerry Spinelli recently won the Newbery Award for *Maniac Magee*, a modern-day legend of a homeless boy who amazes everyone with his unusual abilities. Maniac touches the lives of both black and white members of a racially-divided Pennsylvania town. Readers will be entertained by his unpredictable antics like bunting a frog and then scoring a run, sleeping with the buffalo in the zoo, and winning a race while running backwards. (Ages 9 through 13.)

Information Books

The following selections contain information about the identity of the homeless, ways individuals become homeless, case histories of homeless individuals, various organizations that help the homeless, homeless shelters and welfare hotels, and possible solutions to remedy the problem of homelessness. Most of these books contain photographs and deal with the raw elements of prostitution, substance abuse, and other crimes that unfortunately are an integral part of life on the streets. (Ages 12 and up.)

Fagan, Margaret. *The Fight against Homelessness (Understanding Social Issues)*. Gloucester Press (0-531-17251-1), 1990.

This easy-to-read book is about homelessness in the United States, Britain, and other countries. The last pages of the book contain organizations for obtaining help, a bibliography, and a glossary of frequently used terms.

Hubbard, Jim. *Shooting Back: A Photographic View of Life by Homeless Children*. Chronicle Books (0-8118-0019-9), 1991.

Several hundred photographs taken by homeless children in Washington, D.C., provide a window into the lives of the poor and homeless. This collection is personalized with the children's names and several comments that complement the photography.

Hyde, Margaret. *The Homeless: Profiling the Problem*. Enslow Publishers, Inc. (0-89490-159-1), 1989.

This book contains interviews with homeless individuals in cities and small towns. The last pages include suggestions for those who want to help the homeless, agencies that care for the homeless, and sources for further reading about homelessness.

Kosof, Anna. *Homeless in America*. Franklin Watts (0-531-10519-9), 1988.

The reader will have a better understanding of the homeless who are represented in several cities throughout the United States. Special emphasis is placed on homeless children

and what can be done to remedy this crisis situation. Much of the research in this book is documented with footnotes.

Landau, Elaine. *The Homeless*. Simon and Shuster, Inc. (0-671-53492-5), 1987.

Landau is a newspaper reporter who doesn't need photographs to convey the homeless situation of both children and adults throughout the United States. Although the format may appeal more to older children, younger readers will easily understand the book's content. There is a bibliography of magazine periodicals and books about homelessness.

O'Conner, Karen. *Homeless Children*. Lucent Books, Inc. (1-56006-109-X), 1989.

The tragic situation of homeless children who become victims of prostitution, substance abuse, and AIDS is graphically depicted by O'Conner. The last pages provide sources for further reading, newsletters on homelessness, and various state organizations which serve the homeless.

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