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## Reviews of Books Centering Community

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# Reviews of Books Centering Community

by Dr. Julie Baxa, Julie Bonathan, Bethany Bratney, Phyllis Ness, Dr. Leah van Belle, Julie Watanabe, and Deborah Wolter



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***You Will Do Great Things***  
by Amerie; illus. by Raissa Figueroa. (2023) Roaring Brook Press, 38 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-1250817020 \$18.99

Amerie writes of the hopes and possibilities families feel when a baby is born. One imagines all the great

things that the baby will do and experience throughout their life. They will do daring things, cool things, strange and new things. Some things may feel difficult, but they will be encouraged to never give up. So, they

will try and try and try again, only to succeed at last. With trust as their guide, they will experience many adventures on their own, with family and with friends, in their immediate or the greater global community. They might do great things and change the world or small things that mean the world to just one person. In the end, Amerie encourages the young one to be bold and strong because “you will do great things.”

Amerie, a Grammy-winning American singer who is the daughter of a Korean artist and an African American military officer, incorporates her own family as an inspiration for this book. It begins with a mother and father imagining the promises that life holds for their infant son. At first the illustrations are realistic and have

a scrapbook feel showing toddler and young child milestones and accomplishments. As the story progresses the illustrations become more fantastical as the young child goes off on adventures. Throughout, the bold, vibrant illustrations show the young main character the constant support and strength of his family, who will always be there to encourage and applaud his accomplishments. Children with multiracial family heritage will clearly see themselves in this story. -jkfb

**Tags:** preK, lower elementary (K-3), picture book, fantasy, growing up, community



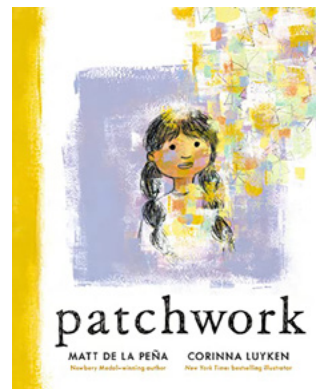
*We Are Here* by Tami Charles; illus. by Bryan Collier. (2023) Orchard Books, 40 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-1338752045, \$18.99

In this companion to *All Because You*

*Matter* (Orchard Books, 2020), Charles and Collier once again create the magic that earned their collaborative work national praise. Weaving together poetry, lyrics, lush art, history, and storytelling, they invite readers to a celebration of the brilliance and resilience of their ancestors, a celebration of Blackness: “The journey of who we are stretches beyond rivers, roads, mountains high-fiving blue skies. We were cool like that from the beginning of time, can’t you see?” Words and pictures dance along a timeline of row houses and pay homage to those who have come before and whose lives continue in the collective memory and actions, including female mathematicians like Katherine Johnson at NASA, George Floyd, and Marion Anderson. But this is no dry reference book. It hums, sings, dances with energy! It echoes with the rhythms of scat and jazz, and celebrates linguistic richness: “We are multidialectal, *oh-so-intellectual!*” The glossary of terms includes Spanish and English—an important affirmation of intersectional identities: “One heart, una alma... un esprit... muchas lenguas. We speak the

language of books and streets, feet stamping concrete.” Community is at the heart of this book. Stretching back. Stretching forward. Always with love and resilience. The end matter includes a list of *Historic Figures and Contributions* included in the book—a great addition for upper elementary readers to dig into the historic context more. The book offers a song of gratitude and hope: “We are seeds, you and me, roots thick with dreams and stars and possibilities.” -lvb

**Tags:** upper elementary (4-5), picture book, collective history, historic figures, storytelling, identity, community



*Patchwork* by Matt de la Peña; illus. by Corinna Luyken. (2022) G.P. Putnam’s Sons / Penguin Random House, 48 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-198481396, \$18.99

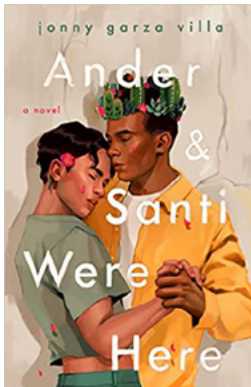
Just as a classroom community is a diverse quilt of individual identities

and experiences, each child is a beautifully complex patchwork of their own. Newbery Medal winner de la Peña invites readers to look more closely at our own and others’ rich inner tapestries, to celebrate the ways we are unique and still come together. Gentle, poetic text describes what others see about someone and what they come to know about themselves. The child who is perpetually in motion with a basketball, baseball, soccer ball, any kind of ball realizes “That the sound of a bouncing ball/ is the language of your loneliness. / You are bilingual. / And one day you will carry words with you instead. / You will spin couplets on your finger / because you’ve always been a poet.” The child who sought attention as the class clown grows to be an adult who uses their playfulness to connect with the most restless students in their class. The child who others may have thought was weak because they were too kind—feeling bad when they win a game or giving away their only cookie—steps into their truth. They are not weak; they are “a powerful magnet, pulling people”

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to serve community in humanitarian efforts. de la Peña acknowledges that growing up and stepping fully into oneself is filled with joy, but also with hard work and big feelings. The child who was marked blue before birth when their mother cut into a blue cake at a gender reveal party finds that “sometimes your paintbrush at school / hovers above the pink... But tears are not pink or blue or weak—they’re human.” Luyken’s illustrations are washes of color floating above sparse line drawings, each child’s world a signature color, but in a patchwork of shades of that color—from the softest whispers of the hue when they are very young to stronger and stronger tones as they grow, and finally with other colors woven into their story. A tender, evocative book that celebrates each individual and reminds us that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. -lvb

**Tags:** lower elementary (K-3), upper elementary (4-5), picture book, identity, community



***Ander and Santi Were Here***  
by Jonny Garza Villa. (2023)  
Wednesday Books / Macmillan,  
368 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-  
1250843999, \$18.99

Ander Martinez is taking a gap year, staying in San Antonio and painting murals all over the community before they leave for the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Ander’s art has always been just like them - queer, Mexican and colorful. But Ander wonders if their art, street art with a casual vibe, is serious enough for an important art school. When Ander’s parents fire them from the family taqueria to give them more time to focus on art and preparing for school, they hire Santiago as a replacement and the connection between the two young people is instantaneous. Unlike the anxiety and confusion that Ander feels about their future, everything with Santiago is easy and comfortable. Their relationship quickly becomes intense and joyous, while Ander’s art becomes more personal and focused on their new-meets-old sense of home that is

developing with Santiago. But when Ander learns that Santiago is not a US citizen, their summer together takes on a new level of importance and Ander’s art school future suddenly feels less critical.

Though this book has its serious moments, the story brims with joy and a strong sense of place. Everything about Ander’s life, from their neighborhood to the taqueria to their art to their family, possesses a palpable connection to the community. Ander is blissfully free to be themselves, one hundred percent of the time, which makes the contrast to Santiago that much stronger. Santi must hide himself and his undocumented status from the world, but in Ander’s bubble, he feels welcomed and knows he belongs. This book is rich with Chicane and Mexican identities, incorporating a rich mix of characters, both English and Spanish words, and more delicious food descriptions than this reader could handle. Ander’s murals are vividly described, and Ander’s increasingly solidified identity as an artist shows readers that growth is possible even in those who already have a strong sense of self. The romance between Ander and Santi is heady, swirling the reader in the inescapable pull of new love, but the reality of Santi’s situation provides the tension and test that comes to all relationships sooner or later. Impressively, the conclusion to the story is both realistic and satisfying, leaving readers with the bittersweet and touching finish that only the best books provide. Hand this book directly to fans of Benjamin Alire Saenz and Mason Deaver. -blb

**Tags:** high school (9-12), chapter book, realistic fiction, art, community, identity, multilingual text



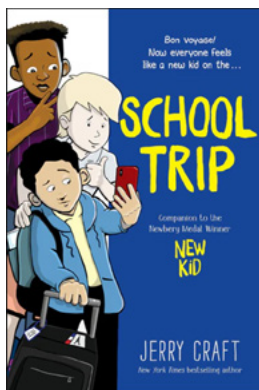
***See Us Bloom: Poems on Compassion, Acceptance, and Bravery*** by Kyunghee Kim; illus. by Emily Paik. (2023) Modern Marigold Books, 32 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-1735031941, \$19.95

*See Us Bloom* was written by

an Ann Arbor Public School educator, Kyunghee Kim, who drew on her own Korean American experiences. In exploring themes of identity and belonging, the comforting book contains a series of short poems, each on a double-spread, but all of which flow together and can be read entirely as a picture book. Yet, there are many opportunities for parents, teachers, and other caregivers to pause and allow children to share personal stories in relation to each poem. Soft and colorful illustrations by Emily Paik embraces the diversity in our world. Not only that there are children of all races and ethnicities, but children with disabilities are also represented as viable and participatory members of their communities.

Children are likely to open up to their experiences of moving to a new home, attending a new school, and learning a new language. And speaking up about saying their names correctly, eating what they love, dressing how they want, and conversing in a language that feels like home. In light of current book bans, censorship, educational gag orders, and other forms of erasure, *See Us Bloom* comes at a time when we are reminded that we all belong here. We can make our own paths, try new things, become friends with change, be brave when we say no, ask for help, and show our light. And that we can be a good friend. -dlw

**Tags:** lower elementary (K-3), picture book, poetry, wellbeing, community



**School Trip** by Jerry Craft. (2023) Quill Tree, 247 pp. Paperback ISBN 978-0062885531, \$14.99

*School Trip* is the third graphic novel in the *New Kid* series by Jerry Craft. The story follows Jordan Banks and his 8th grade classmates as they embark on a school trip

to Paris. Jordan, who transferred to the school in 7th grade, struggles to build community here as a person of color, a scholarship student, and a true city kid from

a modest family. Things go awry from the beginning of the trip and the group must deal with unprepared chaperones and challenging group dynamics while navigating Paris. Long-held conflicts are worked through as the students learn more about themselves and each other through being outsiders in another country. Jordan's friendships that serve as the anchor of the first two books in this series are cemented in the third, and he moves from being the "new kid" to fully integrated in his school and friend group.

This book beautifully captures the endearing awkwardness of middle schoolers: their self-consciousness, obsession with peer approval, struggle between wanting to be independent from and close to family, and frequent sense of being lost (literally and figuratively). It also powerfully shows their humor, empathy, kindness, and honesty. *School Trip* does all of this while tackling issues of racial identity and belonging on every single page. Kids will love the book because it is funny and beautifully illustrated, and they can relate to Jordan. Kids will learn from the book because Jerry Craft does such a masterful job of making Jordan's experiences as a young black man accessible to all children. This book is interesting, funny, complex, and incredibly smart. -jw

**Tags:** middle school (6-8), graphic novel, realistic fiction, community



**When Clouds Touch Us** by Thanhha Lai. (2023) HarperCollins, 256 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-0063047006, \$18.99

*When Clouds Touch Us* is Thanhha Lai's sequel to *Inside Out & Back Again*. This semi-autobiographical book in verse follows 12-year-old

Hà and her family as they move to Texas and root themselves in their community. In the late 1970s, Hà, her mother, and four brothers find asylum in America after the fall of Saigon. While the family members

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have each other for love and support, each must reach out into the greater community to navigate their new home. Hà struggles to make friends and fit in at school, while missing her mother who must work long hours to provide for the family. Her mother instructs her to train her eye to the horizon, where clouds meet land, which represents the future and stability. Eventually the family finds the place where they are touched by clouds and can buy a home and truly plant themselves firmly in the U.S.

This is a book about loss and possibility. Vietnam is present on every page as Hà and her family struggle to process the loss of their homeland and loved ones left behind (including their father, who is a soldier missing in action and presumed dead). The book captures the longings of the family for the life they once knew, but it also embraces the joys and the surprises of living in America and discovering their place here. Through it all, Hà is a strong and resilient protagonist. She is wickedly funny, smart, headstrong, and sensitive. The book format is highly accessible to middle grade readers and the author's use of sensory details bring the world of Vietnam and 1970s America to life. This book will make readers laugh, hurt, wonder, and learn. -jw

**Tags:** middle school (6-8), chapter book, realistic fiction, identity, community



***The Kindest Red: A Story of Hijab and Friendship*** by Ibtihaj Muhammad & S.K. Ali; illus. by Hatem Aly. (2023) Little, Brown and Company, 40 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-0759529847, \$18.99

*The Kindest Red* is the sequel to *The Proudest Blue*—both stories, written by Olympic medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad, are about two sisters, Faizah and Asiya.

On picture day at school, Faizah realizes there is a problem when it comes time for the special sibling photo. Her classmates work together to come up with a plan to solve the problem, a lesson from the classroom trickling out into the real world, a kinder world.

This story opened up a new discussion every time it was read in our household; what kind of world we want to live in, how we can be a part of that world, working together with friends, problem solving, establishing a sense of community, and more. This would be a fantastic read for the beginning of the school year, as it aligns with picture day at school, but also would open up discussion for what kind of classroom students want to be a part of. My three year old enjoyed this story and was able to reap insightful themes from reading, and I am confident it would do the same for students even through 5th grade. -jb

**Tags:** lower elementary (K-3), picture book, realistic fiction, friendship, community



***The Bright Side*** by Chad Otis. (2023) Rocky Pond Books / Penguin Random House, 40 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-0593530627, \$18.99

In *The Bright Side*, Chad Otis describes life on a school bus that served as home for him and his family. Speaking from his own truth of living on the school bus for about four years, he shares stories of having mostly just bread and ketchup standing in for real pizza, taking showers in the great outdoors, and making his own toys. When Chad arrives to a new school in third grade, he struggles to fit in, pay attention to his teacher, learn new concepts, and make friends. When a class party is canceled because of a broken pizza oven and a stuck movie screen, Chad demonstrates creativity in that we can do just about anything if we look on the bright side.

With delightful and diverse illustrations, *Otis* shows that living on a school bus is like “school for life.” Many children today are unhoused but find ways to look optimistically on the bright side. This book does not invite pity or charity. Instead, it will open up conversations about the challenges of housing and belonging in a community, eliciting empathy and inclusion in all children. -dlw

**Tags:** lower elementary (K-3), picture book, auto/biography, community

Nicole Wong’s softly colored and detailed illustrations, the book shows us how sharing with others can bring us immense satisfaction and joy. As young readers look closely at the facial expressions of the characters and talk about the message of the text, they will learn just how much contentment can be found when we pause and recognize that more and most may vie for our attention, but enough wraps us in a snug sweater and says, “This is all you need.” -psn

**Tags:** lower elementary (K-3), picture book, realistic fiction, wellbeing, community



*Enough Is . . .* by Jessica Whipple; illus. by Nicole Wong. (2023) Tilbury House, 32 pp. Hardcover ISBN 978-088489320, \$18.95

How do you know when you have enough? Enough snacks? Enough books? Enough friends? Enough promises? Enough hopes? Enough flowers in a bouquet? In this delightful picture book, we follow a little girl as she grapples with questions of wants and needs. We see her consider just how much of ANYTHING is essential to possess. We watch her discover the joy in sharing a sandwich, letting someone else take a turn, or even covering your head with a backpack in a thunderstorm when you’ve forgotten your umbrella. We delight in her realization that while others may have more than her, what she does have is enough and enough is really just fine!

We live in a world which often promotes consumption and individual gain. We are bombarded daily with advertisements encouraging us to eat supersized meals, drive bigger automobiles, live in larger houses and accumulate MORE of just about everything. Yet, how much do we really need? And what if we shared what we do have with others? In her debut picture book, Jessica Whipple encourages young children to consider these critically important questions. Accompanied by

## Author Biographies

**Dr. Julie Baxa (jfk)** is a lecturer at Oakland University in the Department of Teaching and Learning where she teaches undergraduate courses in reading and assessment-based instruction. Her research focuses on reading assessment and related instruction as well as digital literacies and has been published in *The Reading Teacher* as well as *The Journal of Literacy and Technology*. As a former elementary school teacher with 20+ years of classroom experience including having been a Reading Recovery teacher, her passion has been not only to teach reading but also to help others develop an enthusiasm, eagerness, and love for reading.

**Julie Bonathan (jb)** is a former teacher and certified reading specialist. She earned her undergraduate degree at Madonna University and her master’s degree through Northern Michigan University. In the classroom, she led 3rd, 2nd, and Kindergarten students on their educational journey. She currently works as a private reading tutor for multisensory phonics instruction. Julie is passionate about early literacy and incorporating texts that focus on building community and expanding the minds of her own two children.

**Bethany Bratney (blb)** is a school librarian, currently in her 20th year at Novi High School. She has previously worked as an elementary school librarian and as a high school classroom educator, teaching both English Language Arts and Psychology. She is proud member of the Michigan Association of School Librarians and has



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served in many roles and capacities within the group, including Awards Chair and Co-chair of the MISelf in Books list for 2021 & 2022. She also serves as a member of the LIBRES book review group, a collection of school librarians reviewing books for the Pre-K-12 audience through an educational lens. Her passion, both inside and outside of school, is stories that represent the wide spectrum of humans and identities, and “Do you have a book recommendation for me?” is her favorite question. If not reading, she loves nature, long walks, movie nights with her family and trying not to kill her house plants.

**Phyllis Ness (psn)** is a veteran educator and lifelong learner. She is currently a faculty member in the School of Education and Human Services at Oakland University. She teaches Emergent and Beginning Literacy classes, as well as Literature for Children. Her experience as a teacher of preschool through middle school children was an asset in her previous role as the Elementary Literacy Coordinator for a Detroit area school district. Phyllis is passionate about book access for readers. Her goal is to provide ALL children the opportunity to read books which reflect their unique identities and culture.

**Dr. Leah van Belle (lvb)** serves as the Executive Director of 313Reads. A proud Detroiter and first-generation high school and college graduate, she serves as the Immediate Past President of MRA and on the state’s Early Literacy Task Force. Across all her work in education—as a classroom teacher, literacy coach, director of clinical practice in urban teacher education, and graduate director of literacy programs—sharing books with little humans and their teachers remains one of her greatest joys. Most importantly, she is the mama of a neurodiverse little human who is teaching her to build with LEGO. Family read aloud is the best part of their day.

**Julie Watanabe (jw)** is a middle school literacy specialist in the L’Anse Creuse school district. She has worked with middle schoolers, high schoolers, and adult ESL students over the course of her career. Julie is always looking for ways to hook students on reading. Her

favorite book choices for middle schoolers right now are graphic novels and books in verse.

**Deborah L. Wolter (dlw)** is a retired literacy consultant for Student Intervention and Support Services in Ann Arbor (Michigan) Public Schools. She has worked for over 20 years with public school teachers and their students from all walks of life and who were in different places of exploring multiple languages, literacies, and linguistics. Deborah has written several papers on literacy and family literacy for professional journals. *Restorative Literacies*, co-published with Teachers College Press and International Institute for Restorative Practices, is her third book. She is author of *Reading Upside Down: Identifying and Addressing Opportunity Gaps in Literacy Instruction*, published by Teachers College Press in June 2015. Being deaf since birth, she also offers a unique insider’s perspective on opportunity gaps. Her last book, *Ears, Eyes, and Hands: Reflections on Language, Literacy, and Linguistics*, published by Gallaudet University Press, was released December 2018.