

Book Reviews

October 31, 2019

The 57 Bus

by Dashka Slater

The 57 Bus is a true story of two young people whose paths cross one day with significant impact.

Sasha and Richard were both high school students from Oakland, California, but they inhabited different worlds. Sasha, a white teen who identifies as non-binary and has autism, lived in the middle-class foothills of Oakland and attended a small private school. Richard, a black teen, lived in the crime-plagued flatlands of the city and attended a large public school. Every day, their paths overlapped for a mere eight minutes on the 57 bus.

The book provides insights into the impact of a crime that is committed one day, but does so from various perspectives. The author includes social media posts, perspectives of friends and family that were gathered via interviews and media comments, as well as background information about the two young people involved.

The author compels the reader to consider whether people are a victim of circumstance, whether a child should be held accountable for a reckless and thoughtless act, and whether they should be tried as an adult in the criminal court system. The book also incorporates brief and accessible background about a range of related topics including crime in Oakland (and the US, more generally), the disparate connection between crime and people of colour, and information about LGBTIQ folk.

The various perspectives that are incorporated into the book makes the reader consider issues from different points of view and challenges them to think about what is fair and just.

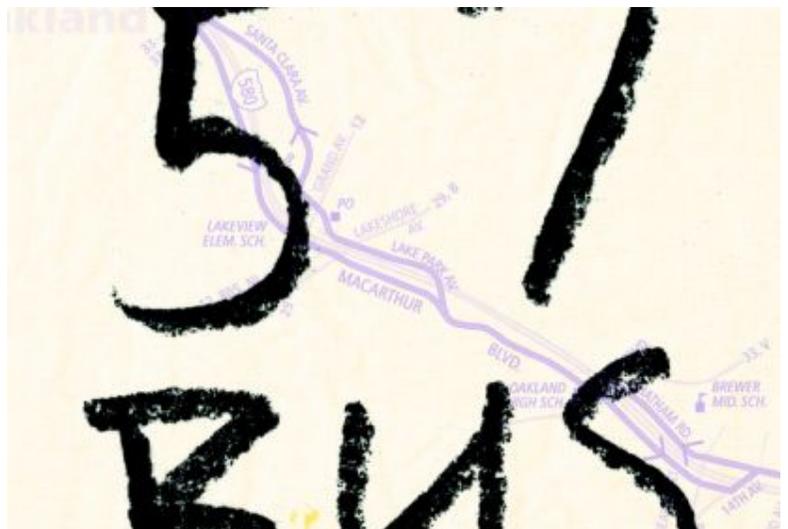
This book would make for excellent discussion in a range of senior classrooms including, but not limited to, Society and Culture, Legal Studies, Modern History and English.

Mel Smith is the officer attached to LGBTIQ matters

Madeline Finn and the Library Dog

By Lisa Papp, Old Barn Books, 2016

This picture book highlights the importance of empathic audiences in helping young children learn to read. Madeline Finn dislikes reading and says, "sometimes I can't figure out the words. Sometimes the sentences get stuck in my mouth like peanut butter." When Madeline reads to Bonnie, the library dog, she finds the



confidence to help her become an empowered reader.

Federation's calls for fair funding would mean that children, like Madeline Finn, would get that extra help they need through smaller class sizes and more one-on-one support.

Front Desk

By Kelly Yang, Walker Books, 2018

This humorous, yet serious, teenage novel is told through the eyes of Mia, an enthusiastic and lovable 10-year-old newly arrived migrant from China. Mia is determined to improve her English language skills, so that she can help her parents, with their limited English, to navigate a world of bullying, racism, poverty, exploitation, wage theft and disappointment. When her parents take on the job of running a motel, Mia enthusiastically volunteers to be their motel receptionist.

The only disappointment with this novel is that it fails to challenge the "American dream", which promotes the myth that anyone, through hard work, can overcome entrenched economic disadvantage. Nor does the author challenge the "two roller coasters" view of American society — where there is one roller coaster for the rich and another for the poor. If you are on the poverty roller coaster it means you are denied a good education and good jobs. Ironically, it is the great public education Mia receives that empowers her to write letters that are so effective in rescuing her family and friends. Nor does the author challenge the exploitation of migrant workers and the need for strong unions. Despite these weaknesses, the novel embraces the values of tolerance and diversity — something more important than ever.

Jean Blackburn: Education, feminism and social justice

By Craig Campbell and Debra Hayes, Monash University Publishing, 2019

This biography of Jean Blackburn (1919-2001) is long overdue. Jean Blackburn was not only a powerhouse of educational justice but also one of the most influential feminist educators in Australia's history. Her pioneering work began with the Whitlam government's education reforms (1974-1975) and together with School Commissioner Peter Carmel, she produced one of Australia's most significant government reports into school disadvantage. Its issues resonate to this day and remain as one of Federation's most important recent campaigns — fair funding.

This committed educator, feminist, activist and intellectual spent her later years as a public bureaucrat researching and publishing socially just education policy for Australian schools. She understood how important schools were in overcoming disadvantage. As the architect of the Disadvantaged Schools Program she understood the need to address social and educational disadvantage through strong government support and funding. Governments needed to invest in centralised professional curriculum development departments as well as invest in individual schools enabling them, through partnership with their communities, to overcome disadvantage.

Jean Blackburn understood all too well, from her own experiences of growing up with a dominating father who contemptuously opposed her education, how easy it was for girls to be denied an education. Despite this, through the support of her mother, she attended Melbourne University High School, and went onto graduate as an economist from Melbourne University. These personal insights into inequality helped her write her ground breaking report, *Girls, School and Society* (1976).

This biography inspires us all to continue our work, as teachers and educators, to demand fair school funding enabling every child to reach her or his potential.

All three books are all available from Federation Library. Look up suggestions for classroom activities in the digital edition of Education.

Janine Kitson is a Federation Life Member