

A Refreshing Look at the Urban Landscape: Beauty in the Urban Experience in Children's Picturebooks

In *Something Beautiful* (1998) by Sharon Dennis Wyeth, and *Last Stop on Market Street* (2015) by Matt de la Pena, the authors and illustrators use their narratives and illustrations to demonstrate contrasts in urban landscapes. *Something Beautiful* is the story of a young, African American girl who sees broken-glass in the courtyard of her apartment complex, graffiti on a door, a homeless woman wrapped in plastic and covered with cardboard, fences along alleys, and gardens without flowers in her urban neighborhood. Yet, she seeks and finds "something beautiful" from the other characters she encounters in the book. *Last Stop on Market Street* tells the story of CJ and his grandmother as they leave a church service and catch a bus. Throughout the story, CJ frets. First, it is about riding the bus instead of owning a car. Next, he grumbles about not having a smart phone so he can listen to music with ear buds. When CJ and his grandmother get off the bus, the illustrator shares scenes similar to those in *Something Beautiful* - fences, graffiti, and a homeless person. Yet, during this journey, CJ's grandmother focuses his attention on the beauty around him, specifically at the end when she says, "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful" (p. 25). While the artistic styles in the two picturebooks are dissimilar, they convey messages similar to the narrative through the illustrations.

Both picture books end with the children engaging in their urban neighborhoods, and empowered to make a difference. The protagonist in *Something Beautiful* cleans up the graffiti, and vows to plant a garden. CJ and his grandmother, in *Last Stop on Market Street*, volunteer at a soup kitchen.

Mirci, Loomis and Hensley (2011) assert, "Oppression is a sense of powerlessness and exclusion" (p. 58). In these two texts, the authors and illustrators provide readers with an opportunity to conceptualize urban life and those who live there as resilient, and empowered, supported by the people who surround them.

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Mirci, P., Loomis, C., & Hensley, P. (2011). Social Justice, Self-Systems, and Engagement in Learning: What Students Labeled as "At-Risk" Can Teach Us. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, 2357-74.

McCallum, R., & Stephens, J. (2011). Ideology and children's books. In S.A. Wolf, K. Coats, P. Encisco & C.A. Jenkins (Eds). *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 359-371.