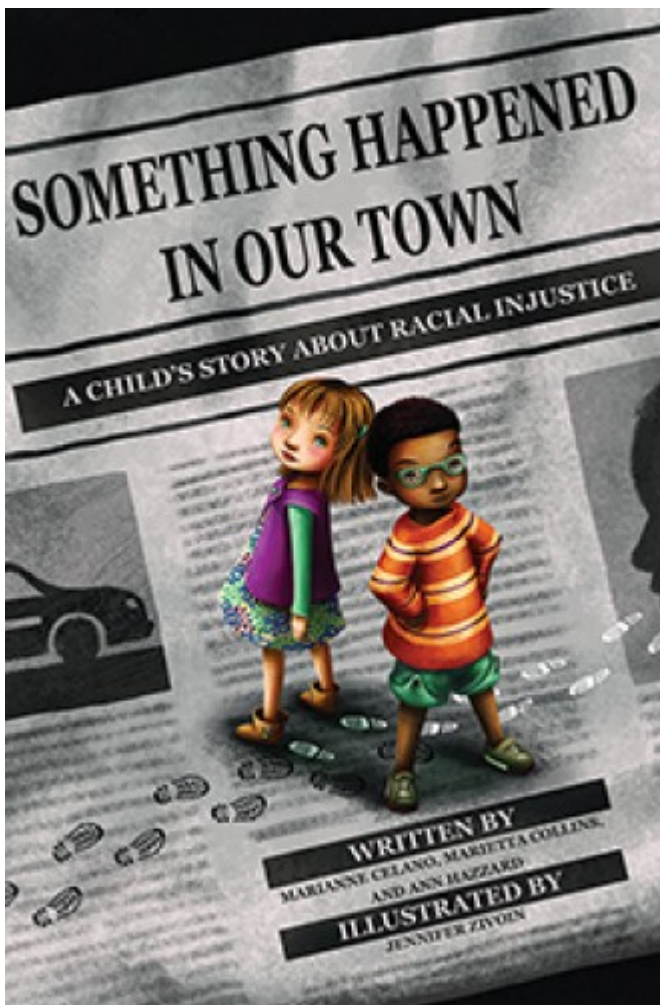


Talking to white kids about what whiteness means

Three children's books to help start the conversation

by [Kaethe Schwehn](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue

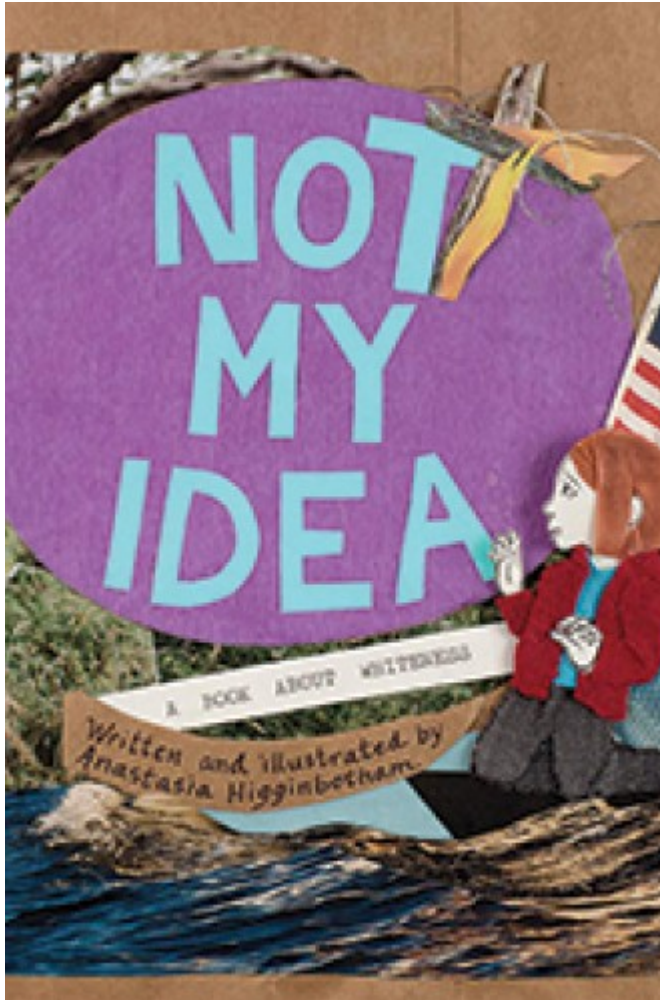
In Review



Something Happened in Our Town

A Child's Story about Racial Injustice

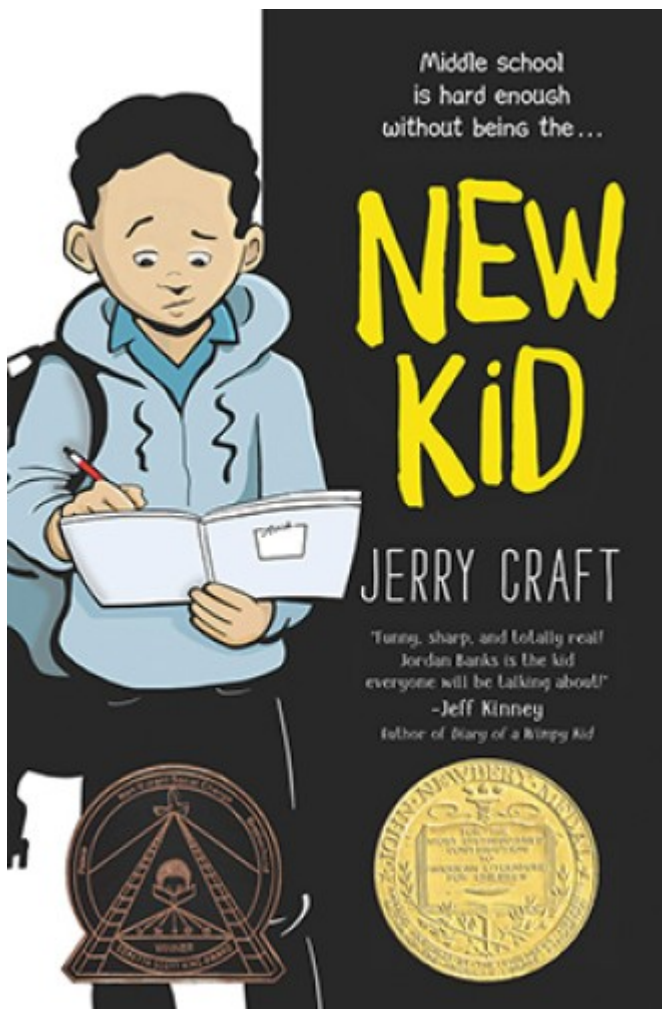
By Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard; illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin
Magination Press



Not My Idea

A Book About Whiteness

By Anastasia Higginbotham
Dottir Press



New Kid

By Jerry Craft
Quill Tree Books

I'm the mother of a white ten-year-old daughter and a white six-year-old son, and somehow, in the last ten years, I have neglected mentioning to them that black people are dying at the hands of white police officers. I haven't been an entirely bad liberal parent. I've done what I'd call "racism education lite." My husband and I have talked at the dinner table about slavery and discrimination. Our kids' enrollment in an elementary Compañeros program (with classes taught half in Spanish and half in English) has offered cultural and linguistic diversity in our predominantly white town. And last year, when local ICE raids were imminent, we talked about why some people didn't feel safe walking around our town.

Still: I didn't tell my kids about Tamir Rice or Philando Castile or Freddie Gray or Jamar Clark or Michael Brown. After all, did they need to know everything? Shouldn't I wait for them to bring their questions to me when they were ready? And how were they going to understand huge, complicated systems of injustice anyway?

Then, seven months before George Floyd was killed, my son and daughter were pulled over by a cop on their way to school. They were on their bikes, and the officer gave them a coupon for ice cream because they'd remembered to wear their helmets. Starstruck by the encounter, my son now tells us, again and again, that he wants to be a police officer when he grows up.

So when Floyd died with Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck, I knew my husband and I would need to have a conversation with our kids. Still struggling with how to do it, I turned to the place I turn for pretty much everything: books. When I asked my indie bookseller friend for recommendations that would help guide my kids into the dialogue, she offered a few titles and then sagely pointed out: "Kids don't struggle to get into these conversations as much as we might think; it's the grownups who need tools and language to lead the way." She was right. The books she recommended offered me the tools and language to begin the conversation.

The "something" in the picture book *Something Happened in Our Town* is the wrongful shooting of a black man by a white police officer. The book follows two elementary-age kids, one white and one black, who hear the news at school and then return to their respective homes and ask their parents about it.

Both sets of parents explain and offer advice. The next day, a new kid named Omad arrives at school. He's from a faraway country and doesn't speak much English; when it's time to choose teams for soccer, the other students shun him. But the two protagonists use the wisdom their parents offered to act compassionately and inclusively.

As a mom, I appreciate that this book couples conversation with agency and action. Thisbe, my daughter, likes the way it "talks about anyone who is new or different, because people tend to judge people they don't know." She also likes that "it shows both perspectives, black and white."

Not My Idea: A Book about Whiteness also follows an elementary-age kid as she asks her mom questions about the recent murder of an unarmed black man by a white police officer. But in this book, the white mom offers false platitudes ("Our family is

kind to everyone. We don't see color"), refuses to engage in real dialogue with her daughter, and even locks the car door when they drive through a predominantly black neighborhood.

At this point, the book's narrator steps in to explain that "skin color makes a difference in how the world sees you and in how you see the world." As the pages turn, we watch the white girl begin to see her world anew: the way the store security guard keeps his eye on the black kid and barely notices the white kid, the way her aunt turns away from racial injustice on the television, the way history is filled with white people "who have committed outrageous crimes against black people for four hundred years" and also with "people who love justice" and "have been fighting back."

As someone floundering to find the right words to engage in conversation, I appreciate this book because it provides very clear and specific language to talk about white privilege. Thisbe likes this book because she admires the way "the girl kept pushing for answers." She also thinks it does a better job than *Something Happened in Our Town* of "showing how white people trust other white people more than they trust black people."

Both of my kids adore *New Kid*, a graphic novel about Jordan, a black seventh-grader who is the "new kid" at a rich, predominantly white, private school. What Thisbe likes most about this book is that "no one is totally bad but you can see that they're still making mistakes about racism." Indeed, while police brutality is absent from this book, it contains an onslaught of microaggressions: the white teacher who perpetually mistakes one black kid for another, the other white teacher who follows up everything he says with, "Was that racist?" and the white kid who repeatedly refers to the Nicaraguan kid as Mexican.

Both of my kids were capable of reading this book on their own, but as white kids they missed some of the microaggressions. Such transgressions are subtler than overt violence; they're also more likely to occur within the worlds my kids inhabit. So it's important to me that they learn to recognize and respond to them. Thisbe likes the book for its tonal range and ultimate message: "It's funny as well as sad. The book is about how different people are expecting different things of [Jordan] and how he has to figure out how to be one person. It's about how you have to stay true to yourself no matter what."

These three books mark just the beginning of a conversation in our family—a conversation that will necessarily be complicated and awkward and imperfect. It will need to be watered and tended on a regular basis. “Grow justice inside yourself like a bean sprout,” suggests the narrator in *Not My Idea*.

“What if it dies?” asks the girl.

“Plant it again,” replies the narrator. “A strong, internal sense of justice will not fail you—even when a lack of justice in the world does.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Racism education.”