Bully on the bus by Kathryn Apel

I loved this verse novel and so did my nine-year-old son. The verse format makes it a shorter and easier read, plus also brings the story alive with emotion, using poetic language and the playful placement of words on the page. Leroy’s daily journey on the school bus becomes unbearable as DJ the bully taunts him relentlessly and he doesn’t know how to make it stop.

I would recommend reading this book all in one go as until Leroy finds help it quite an emotionally tough read. Apel does a really good job of getting the reader to empathise with what it is like to be the one being bullied.

Leroy is desperate for help but too scared to ask for it. But it is not all bad as you also get a glimpse into Leroy’s life and what other things sustain him – his love for his school work, teacher and classmates; for reading; and his close relationship with his parents and in particular sister Ruby who stands up for him. This gave my son and I the chance to talk about what things can help us feel good or protect us during difficult times.

My son and I kept going until the end, when Leroy had additional supports around him – his parents, his teacher and the bus driver – who support him emotionally and provide him with practical tools to give him the courage to stand up to the bully. My son was almost applauding him, with a look of relief all over his face.

At the conclusion of the story you get the sense the character DJ reflects on her actions and with support from adults at the school she tries to say sorry by helping Leroy with his reading. Leroy returns the gesture by making her a cupcake. I am assuming this is to try to get readers to think of some possible reasons why kids bully and that they themselves might need support. But it did seem like a bit of a tag on, the story’s strength is definitely following the impact on Leroy and him finding a way to standing up for himself.

Reviewed by Kim Higginson, Mental Health Foundation Information Management Specialist

The Mental Health Foundation’s Information Service brings you reviews this Pink Shirt Day on books with bullying prevention themes. To view the full Good Reads section go to https://www.pinkshirtday.org.nz/good-reads/