

Children's Book of the Month Review

Ghost Boys, by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Reviewed by George Bennett, 5th-6th grade teacher



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Ghost Boys, by Jewell Parker Rhodes, is an emotionally challenging but very rewarding book, based on all-too-topical real events. It's narrated by the ghost of a 12-year-old black boy, Jerome Rogers and begins with his death. We discover that he has been shot on the street by a white policeman who assumed the toy gun Jerome was playing with was real. However, despite the book's somber subject matter, the author manages to bring in flashes of humor that lighten the narrative, and she ends the story with a feeling of hope that such events can be changed.

The narrative switches from Jerome's experience when he is alive, and his observations of the world when he's dead. Alive, Jerome spends much of his time negotiating the troubled streets of his neighborhood and avoiding the school bullies who make his life miserable. Dead, Jerome observes the reactions of his family and the wider world to his death: 'Doesn't seem fair,' he says. 'Nobody ever paid me any attention. I skated by. Kept my head low. Now I'm famous.'

As a ghost, Jerome attends the court hearing to determine whether his killer, Officer Moore, should face charges. There he discovers that Moore's 12-year-old daughter Sarah can see him, and that he and she can talk to each other. Sarah begins by believing her father's version of events. She initially accepts his picture of Jerome as a large and threatening figure but, in a series of conversations with Jerome, she — and the reader — soon see that her father's actions were a result of racial prejudice and false assumptions.

Jerome is also able to see other 'real' ghost boys, the most important of whom is the ghost of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy killed in Mississippi in 1955, whose death was one of the sparks that fired up the civil rights movement. Emmett is at first reluctant to tell his story, saying that Jerome is not ready to hear it, and only towards the end of

the book do we, and Jerome, learn what happened back then.

Acting as Jerome's guide, Emmett tells him that he and Sarah have to help each other deal with the aftermath of his death. Only the living can change the world, but they can learn from the dead. Jerome discovers that the ghost boys can all speak to a particular live person, as he can speak to Sarah, and help guide their thinking. When we discover whom Emmett Till has been talking to in the land of the living, it's a very satisfying conceit.

Ghost Boys is short by the standards of modern children's books, but all the more effective as a result. It's written very economically, in short chapters and terse sentences, but manages to be surprisingly complex. We see a great deal through Jerome's eyes as a ghost, but we also learn how hard life can be for inner city black children. In the chapters marked 'Alive', we meet a variety of characters, including the grandmother who is bringing up Jerome and the new friend who inadvertently plays a part in the events leading to his death.

The Village School's 5th-6th grade class recently read and studied *Ghost Boys* over an intensive three-week period and the whole class found it gripping, educational and very moving. As one 5th-grader commented, "The intensity of this book sucks you into the problem, the excitement and the sorrow." while a 6th-grader wrote, "*Ghost Boys* made a big impression on our class and I hope it will make an impression on other people too, so we can stop racism altogether."