

2012

Finding Their Way in a New Land

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Recommended Citation

Cancino, Herlinda (2012) "Finding Their Way in a New Land," *Journal of Multilingual Education Research*: Vol. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://fordham.bepress.com/jmer/vol3/iss1/8>

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Book Reviewed:

Hauser, B. (2011). *The New Kids. Big Dreams and Brave Journeys at a High School for Immigrant Teens*. New York, NY: Free Press – A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 309 pages, hardcover list price \$26.00; also available in paperback and as an audiobook.

Brooke Hauser's 2011 book, *The New Kids. Big Dreams and Brave Journeys at a High School for Immigrant Teens*, invites the reader to share in the experiences of recent immigrants who attend a high school whose student body is a visual and aural rainbow of 45 countries and 28 languages. Hauser brings to her work the eye and writing style of a journalist – she has written for *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*.

This volume has been acclaimed for its information and insights. *The New Kids* received one of the ten "Alex Awards" given in 2012 by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association. YALSA's website states that Alex Awards are given annually "to ten books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults, ages 12 through 18." Hauser's book also earned a listing in *People* magazine's "Picks and Pans" section (November 21, 2011 issue).

In 20 chapters and an epilogue, Hauser describes the students, their classrooms, their teachers, and their aspirations. Her views emerge from spending a year interacting with students attending International High School at Prospect Heights, in Brooklyn, New York. In order to maintain narrative cohesion, the author focuses on just a few of those students, all who are recent immigrants, learning English: Mohamed from Sierra Leone, Yasmeeen from Yemen, Ngawang from Tibet, Jessica from China, and Chit Su from Burma. Hauser gently and invitingly immerses her readers in the lives of these five students, with notable depth and texture in her descriptions. Her writing shows patience, warmth, and incisive (but not intrusive) probing into their lives as newcomers to the United States. The vivid and provocative flavor of this book is illustrated in the following excerpt about one of her subject's school lunchroom encounters:

Inching forward, Chit Su looks at the pictures of different foods on the bulletin board. To many new students, lunchroom staples like chicken nuggets and meat loaf are unfamiliar. So are the utensils that come wrapped in plastic on their trays. Some of the African girls, who grew up eating a cassava porridge called *fufu* with their hands and never learned how to use a fork, have been asking for etiquette lessons. Unglamorous as it is, the cafeteria is the first step to dining in public, one reason why the girls sit in the back of the room, near the wall of Snapple vending machines.

"Next!" the lunch lady barks.

Somewhere, the pop of a plastic sandwich bag shatters the air like a gunshot, and Chit Su jumps. Clutching the straps of her backpack, she keeps her eyes trained on Chhoki's pink shirt. At the head of the line, Chhoki says something to the lunch lady, who hands Chit Su a white Styrofoam tray with pizza and a carton of milk. Inside a clear wrapper is a folded napkin and a white plastic spork that Chit Su examines with interest. When she looks up, the pink shirt is gone.

Standing at the front of the cafeteria, Chit Su grips her tray. It is only the fourth day of school, but already cliques have formed (pp. 18-19).

Most of the students faced unimaginable difficulties reaching the United States from their native lands. Once in New York, they found life perplexing and confusing. This was the result of their lack of English language skills, and in some other instances, poverty. The joke among the faculty is that prospective students must fail testing—especially English language proficiency—to obtain admission into the school. However, negotiating the academic and social barriers while learning English promises daily peril for these students. Highlighting the complexities they face, throughout the book and particularly in the epilogue, the author dares to suggest which of the students will walk through open doors to the American Dream, and which will find the door slammed shut.

Hauser wisely does not limit herself to relying on the students as sources. By integrating the views of the teachers, parents, siblings, guardians, and social workers involved in the lives of the students, her description is rich, authentic, and comprehensive.

The New Kids is a tasty and nourishing look – a close, caring look – into the lives of these five students inside and outside their school. Hauser's book is one that beckons, not compels, the reader. "I couldn't put this book down until I finished it!" is not something the reader will say about *The New Kids*. Rather, it can be skimmed, scanned, or savored – and the book's structure allows one to experience it in small or large blocks of time. This is a book to be enjoyed on the beach or at home in a comfortable easy chair. Hauser lets her reader tag along as she moves with these students through a year of high school. For her readers, *The New Kids* makes an informative and memorable companion.

Hauser's book is for everyone to read. It does not require specialized knowledge on immigration nor education. As the country embarks on important decisions regarding immigration in the United States, the author personalizes the discussion. She gives names, places, descriptions of the everyday encounters and challenges that provide a face, a human dimension to the discussion. Immigration is not a just an empty, political issue. Hauser's message is that the political crevices of immigration are populated by youngsters who want to become members in this society and reach their full potential.