Jennifer **Buehler**

"Their Lives Are Beautiful, Too":

How Matt de la Peña Illuminates the Lives of Urban Teens

As an author who writes about the experiences of urban teens, Matt de la Peña understands that there's a clear line separating the haves from the have-nots in America. Having grown up poor in a Mexican American border town (National City, California), the son of a white mother and a first-generation Mexican American father, Matt knows firsthand that skin color and income level play a powerful role in urban teens' perceptions of the world—and in the world's perceptions of them.

That's why Matt's novels—*Ball Don't Lie* (Delacorte, 2005), *Mexican WhiteBoy* (Delacorte 2008), and his newest book, *We Were Here* (Delacorte, 2009)—take such an unflinching look at the role of race and class in urban teens' lives and identity formation. Whether his characters are talented athletes or teens in the juvenile justice system, they see the privileges conferred on kids born into white middle-class homes, and they recognize how much less they themselves have been given by virtue of their birthright. For Matt's characters, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of developing race and class consciousness—that is, deciding who they can be in a world that expects so much less of them than their white middle-class peers.

"I've always wanted to write about the other side of the tracks, the have-nots," Matt said, "maybe because that's who I was." Getting readers to *see* those have-nots is the goal that drives all of Matt's work. "I'll never forget this epiphany I had when I lived in L.A. I saw this kid sitting alone on a bus stop bench, hood up, headphones on, holding a basketball. People pulling up to the stoplight were oblivious to his existence. Folks in nice cars like BMWs and Mercedes and Jags just didn't see him. I tried to figure out what that meant to me. And then I said to myself, 'Man, I want to write about kids like him. I want to show how his life is just as beautiful as the lives of the rich folks sitting in those nice cars. I want to make people see him for three hundred pages.' And I guess that's what I'm still shooting for."[1]

Writing about the Forgotten Kids

The image of the kid with his hood up resonated deeply with Matt, in part because of his own experiences as a teenager. Noticing how kids in school were implicitly sorted into groups on the basis of social class and skin color made a powerful impression on him. Though Matt conceded that some of that sorting was self-imposed, the result was that some kids had a real chance to succeed and were encouraged to go to college, while others were basically forgotten. Eventually the forgotten kids expected nothing more for themselves than their teachers did.

"I was in that [forgotten] group," Matt said. "But my cousins, who were darker than me and did worse in school, they were *deep* in that dismissed group. I think the world sort of looks to the kids who have potential. These are the kids who are going to do something with their lives, who are going to do something for the world. I don't think it's malicious, but the other kids get lost from that point on. I was lucky enough to get a basketball scholarship. And once I arrived on campus, my thinking started to evolve. My self-perception evolved. But most kids like me aren't so lucky."

Matt admitted that he went to college mostly for basketball and girls. Once he arrived, however, he quickly realized that college was his ceiling for basketball—he knew he was never going to play in the NBA. For the first time in years, he started wondering what else he could be good at. "I had an interesting moment where I was like, okay, well, what am I going to do now? All along I'd been writing street poetry, never showing anyone. And then I started to see a parallel between grace in basketball and grace in street poetry."

But it was only when Matt won a big writing contest during his junior year that his self-perception changed significantly. Winning shocked not only him, but most everyone around him, because so few people knew that he wrote. Having professors recognize his talent helped Matt see himself differently. "That validation, those professors picking *me*, it completely changed the way I viewed myself. For the first time in my life I thought, man, maybe I *am* smart."

As the first person in his family to go to college, Matt was motivated to succeed academically, in part because he wanted to make his mom proud. "She was so happy I made it to college. And I wanted to see her like that always. A lot of sons have this, I think. She'd given so much to her kids and I wanted to reward her somehow. So I invested everything in school and books."[2]

And yet the privilege of attending college could be fraught at times. "A lot of my family were full Mexican—my cousins, my uncles, my aunts—and so I felt like I was a little bit less than, in terms of the culture. However, on the flip side, those same people sort of built me up as the hope of the family, you know, like Matt's going to go to college, and he's going to do this. And so that leaves you feeling both proud and incredibly guilty at the same time."[3]

Despite the recognition he'd received for his writing, as college graduation neared, Matt still hadn't become his own advocate. Perhaps he'd been one of the forgotten kids in school for too long. Convinced of his talent, Matt's *professors* filled out applications to graduate MFA programs for him, knowing that Matt wouldn't have believed such a thing was possible. He got into two of them. Soon his street poetry gave way to short stories, which gave way to novels, and the kid he'd seen at the bus stop with his hood up became the protagonist of his first book, *Ball Don't Lie*.

But even after he'd made it to graduate school at San Diego State University, Matt had more catching up to do. "I didn't know my POVs, my tenses," he explained. "I was writing with my heart, not my head." In time, Matt learned his craft. When he finished *Ball Don't Lie*, he sent it to five agents. Four of them wanted the book, which was eventually published by Random House and released as a movie last fall starring Rosanna Arquette, Ludacris, and a young streetball player named Grayson "The Professor" Boucher.[4] (Matt himself had a bit part as the referee in the big game, and his dad played the school janitor.[5]) *Ball Don't Lie* also earned literary accolades when it was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association, as was Matt's second novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*—which was also named to the ALA's Top Ten list.

Representing the complexity of urban kids' experience requires Matt to paint honest portraits of impoverished urban neighborhoods and the dangers they contain.

Since those early successes, Matt has continued to keep his focus as a writer on the forgotten kids. When talking about his work, he often still mentions the boy with the hood up, how his life is beautiful, too.[6] But at the same time, representing the complexity of urban kids' experience requires Matt to paint honest portraits of impoverished urban neighborhoods and the dangers they contain—including fights, hustles, drug and alcohol abuse, and occasional acts of theft or vandalism. Born into the urban environment, Matt's characters are both perpetrators of violence and victims of it. They talk and behave in ways that may offend middle-class sensibilities, but those practices allow them to survive.

Matt's books give the real kids who live in low-income urban communities a voice, and they give middle-class readers a glimpse into lives very different from their own. His novels also offer readers insight into the *motives* behind characters' decisions, even when the decisions they make are bad ones. Matt goes to great lengths to explore the nuances of urban teens' emotional lives, including their fears and yearning, the hurts they've experienced, and the poignancy of their goals and dreams. In light of the social and material obstacles they face, the fact that his characters are still trying to do right, albeit on their own time and in their own ways, is no small achievement—and that's what Matt wants the world to see.

"I've always thought it was super important, out of respect, that I *show* the forgotten kids, the group with 'less potential.' Because I really think there is beauty there, too. And grace. And dignity. Sometimes the growth these folks show is amazing. Maybe they don't become doctors, but their growth should still be highlighted."[7]

Highlighting Injustice and Inequality: Ball Don't Lie

Pieces of Matt's personal story and ways of thinking about the world are evident in each of his novels, as is his desire to cast light on the role that race and class play in urban teens' identity formation. For example, the pivotal scene in *Ball Don't Lie*, Matt's first novel, isn't a moment on the basketball court. Instead, it's a moment where the main character, Sticky—a white foster kid who spends all his spare time playing basketball with homeless guys at Lincoln Rec, an all-black gym—is forced to confront his position in a society that's structured to preserve inequality. Though Sticky has phenomenal talent and dreams of playing in the NBA, the poverty that oppresses him on a daily basis turns something as seemingly simple as getting a birthday present for his girlfriend into a complex challenge. Panhandling enables him to raise some of the money he needs, but it's not enough to buy the gold bracelet he has his eye on at Macy's department store, so he plans to steal it.

Sticky doesn't want to hear these ideas. In fact, he can barely stand to think about them.

Sticky spends days plotting his theft, rationalizing that he'd never rob a rich person on the street, but that gold from Macy's is ripe for the taking. When Dante, an older player at Lincoln Rec and a mentor to Sticky, hears this logic, it triggers something in him. He feels compelled to challenge Sticky's reasoning, arguing that moral distinctions like Sticky's make no sense in a world where the laws are set up by the people who have everything in order to protect them from the people who have nothing (228).

But Dante can't stop at this point. Reflecting on how his own life has been shaped by his skin color and his poverty, he urges Sticky to recognize the full depth of his disenfranchisement. Dante lays a series of three stones on the ground outside the back of Lincoln Rec to illustrate his message:

> *See that wall in front a you?* he says. *In America, life's like a race to that wall. That's the way I see it.* He sets the first stone less than a foot from the wall, points and says: *If you born white and got money then you start the race way up here. Ahead of everybody . . . .*
>
> *But say you ain't white and ain't rich. Say you poor and black. Or you Mexican. Puerto Rican . . . . You may not even have enough food to eat a balanced meal every night . . . . In this case you startin the race of life way back here.* He points to the second stone. *Only a fool would think someone who starts here has the same opportunities as cats startin at the first stone . . . .*
>
> *And let me tell you something. If you some scrubby white boy who's been moved in and out of different foster homes since you was little, then you off the charts, boy . . . .* Dante snatches up another stone and puts it even further back. Points at it. Moves Sticky's face so he has to look at it . . . . *You startin out way back here. You three stones back.* (229–230)

Sticky doesn't want to hear these ideas. In fact, he can barely stand to think about them. But in the aftermath of Dante's speech, the driving question for Sticky becomes, what is he going to do about his situation? Where will Sticky draw his own moral line?

In a telephone interview during July 2009, [8] Matt explained that a big aspect of his experience growing up was sorting out his feelings about living in poverty. "I used to be so angry about the kids that had stuff," he said. "Like the kids that had cars, the kids that had money to go get lunch every day off campus. I used to feel so slighted. I was like, hey man, why do they have stuff and I don't? And I used it as a defense mechanism. I hated them before they could judge me. I wanted to punch first, if that makes sense."

In giving his characters a similar awareness of social and economic inequality, Matt allows them—and perhaps some of his readers—to feel a bit of that same anger. As a writer, however, Matt is careful never to present his characters as victims who are trapped by their circumstances. Instead, he portrays them as people who are faced with a series of choices.

It's up to them to decide how to respond to the injustices they face. "I think it's really fun to watch kids figure out where they draw the moral line," Matt said. "Because the truth is, you know, there is no set-in-stone line . . . . it's all set by others, and usually by people who have everything. So I think it's interesting to watch kids realize that and then figure out where they're going to put their line."

Matt related his stance on teens' negotiations with morality to his reading of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* in graduate school. "I'll never forget when he was breaking down the definition of good and bad, how he said it was merely a product of who's looking at it. So if the aristocratic society is looking down at the proletariat and they're saying, 'Well look, they're trying to take our stuff, or they're poor and they're making the street dirty, they're bad.' But then, you know, the working class people are looking at the aristocrats and saying, 'But they have all the money and they're hoarding it, so they're bad.' I think bad depends on whose point of view it is. And with kids like these that I like to work with, they're not necessarily *bad,* but they're trying to figure out where to fit their sense of morality into the world."

Matt raises ideas like these in his novels—issues of inequality, and morality, and personal choice—because he's seen how young people's responses to the injustices they face can have life or death consequences. One of Matt's own cousins had a boyfriend who, like Sticky, tried to steal money to get her a gift. Unlike Sticky, the cousin's boyfriend was shot and killed.

For Matt, writing novels provides a space for figuring out how and why such things can happen, and exploring what they mean. "A lot of people ask me, 'Are you born a writer?' And I don't think it's necessarily true. I just think what you either have or you don't is this ability to see something that's complex and worth talking about."

Exploring Racial Awakening and Race Consciousness: Mexican WhiteBoy

During an interview with Amy Bowllan in August of 2009,[9] Matt reflected on his body of work so far. He said that the most prominent recurring theme is the search for racial identity and racial awakening—although he conceded that class also plays an important role. Even before he became a novelist, Matt used writing to explore the role that race and racism often play in young people's identity formation. "In everything I've ever written—even the stupid poems I used to write in high school to try and get girls—elements of racism and racial identity and racial consciousness color the world."

Like Sticky, Matt was a racial outsider at the all-black community gym in Balboa Park where he played basketball day and night during high school. The racial alienation he felt when he first arrived at the gym was so strong, it caused him to question his talent for the game. "I'll never forget the first day I showed up and tried to play. The regulars laughed at me and said I'd come to the wrong place. 'Yo, Mexicans don't play ball,' one of the guys announced, and all his guys busted up. 'Yeah,' another guy said. 'What you need to do is get yourself a soccer ball, Pele. Kick it around in the grass outside.' They all laughed and laughed. I wasn't allowed to play that day. The next day, either. In fact, I spent the entire first week up in the bleachers, watching. I wondered if they were right. Maybe I would never be good enough to play in college because I was Mexican."

For Matt, writing novels provides a space for figuring out how and why such things can happen, and exploring what they mean.

Of course, it turned out that Matt was good enough to play in college. By the time high school was over and he was offered a basketball scholarship, a few of the guys from the gym even showed up at Matt's school on the day he signed his letter of intent. Looking back, he counts those men as some of the most important people in his life. But his first experience with them was uncomfortable—and profoundly racialized.

Therefore, it makes sense that in all three of Matt's novels, characters engage in an ongoing process of reading each other racially. They form understandings of who other people are, at least in part, on the basis of ideas they have about those people as members of different racial groups. But just as important, Matt's characters read *themselves* racially. This is especially true for Danny, the biracial protagonist of Matt's second novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*:

> And Danny's brown. Half-Mexican brown. A shade darker than all the white kids at his private high school, Leucadia Prep. Up there, Mexican people do under-the-table yard work and hide out in the hills because they're in San Diego illegally. Only other people on Leucadia's campus who share his shade are the lunch-line ladies, the gardeners, the custodians. But whenever Danny comes down here, to National City—where his dad grew up, where all his aunts and uncles and cousins still live—he feels pale. A full shade lighter. Albino almost. Less than. (2)

It was in a Blogtalk Radio interview with Cyrus Webb[10] that Matt acknowledged how closely Danny's struggles with race mirror his own experience. "I think Danny was the hardest character I've written so far for one simple reason, and that is, he's probably the closest to me in terms of the stuff he's dealing with. I was a biracial kid—father Mexican, mom white, just like Danny."

Matt's aim in raising these issues is to help readers appreciate the substance and the significance of urban teens' thoughts.

Matt's connections with Danny gave him plenty of insights as a writer dealing with the tensions of being biracial. In other ways, however, he struggled while writing Danny. "I was really mean to him in the first draft," Matt explained. "I was a little bit hard on him, because I kind of *blamed* him for not fitting in and not being Mexican enough. And then in the revision, I had to pull back, because I don't think the writer should ever blame any character. And so I had to pull back and just let him exist and sort of study him in a way, kind of like he's studying Kyle [the white pitcher Danny admires on the Leucadia Prep baseball team]. But that's actually where he came from, was from a lot of issues I felt growing up."

Danny's talent as a baseball player offers him a way to become somebody, to escape the poverty he finds in National City during the summer he spends there with his relatives. But it's different for his cousin Sofia and his friend Uno, a biracial kid with a black father and a Mexican mother. The connections they see between race and poverty—in the form of the limited life chances available to the majority of dark-skinned people in their community—make it hard for them to imagine any other way of living. And yet that doesn't stop them from actively thinking and wondering about the future.

At times their view is cynical. When Uno asks Sofia if she's ever thought about college, she reveals the low expectations she has for herself. "What do I know about college?" she replies. "Nobody I know's ever been there. Nobody in *my* family, that's for sure" (210–211).

But Sofia doesn't stop there. She keeps thinking, going on to recall the memory of watching a little Mexican girl play with her parents at the neighborhood playground. Sofia tells Uno how the little girl sat for a moment at the top of a slide, laughing and clapping, before calling out to her parents down below, 'Here I come.' Watching that little girl prompted Sofia to reflect on what she herself had lost in the process of growing up poor and Mexican in National City:

> It was like she was saying it to more than just her parents . . . . She was saying it to everybody around her that day. To the whole world even. "Here I come." And I kept thinking, Man, I bet I was like that when I was little, too. What's happened to me since then? We all start out believing we can do anything. Even Mexican kids who grow up here. But at some point we lose it. It totally disappears. Like me, for example. Why is that? (212)

Despite their awareness of the very real disadvantages that correlate with their social class and skin color, Matt's characters don't give up. Sofia and Uno continue to talk about and imagine what their future lives could be. They hold onto the hope of achieving some form of success, and they take small steps toward getting there.

Matt's aim in raising these issues is to help readers appreciate the substance and the significance of urban teens' thoughts, no matter where their conversations occur or how their ideas get expressed. "A lot of people look at characters from working class families, and they don't know how much thinking these kids do. And they're not just thinking about small things. Sometimes they're going to talk about big things. And maybe the language isn't perfect, it's not proper English every bit of the way. But they *are* going to discuss [weighty issues, like structural inequality, or religious faith], and it may come up when they're just watching this kid [Danny, in *Mexican WhiteBoy*] throw the ball alone. You know, like what does all this mean?"[11]

Matt cultivates this quality of thoughtfulness in his characters because he grew up seeing it in the people around him. During our telephone interview,[12] he explained what he noticed about conversations at the gym back in Balboa Park where he played basketball as a teenager. "I remember just listening, because I never spoke. I would just listen. And I was amazed at how intelligent the dialogue can be at times between a guy who works at a gas station all night and a guy who sells drugs. It's amazing. At times you will hear some things that are smarter than anything you would hear at school."

As a novelist, Matt learned to capture that kind of intelligence through dialogue, embedding profound insights about the world into ordinary street dialect. "A lot of it is metaphor, you know, ways of comparing one thing to another, that's like a really cool connection. And that maybe the middle class reader might not expect. But I think it's amazing. The truth is, yes, there are different speech patterns, but there's intelligence in *every* kind of speech pattern."

Matt continues to find evidence of this intelligence—and material for his books—in his everyday life in New York, where he now teaches creative writing classes at NYU and Gotham Writers Workshop. He explained how a conversation he overheard on the train between a father and his son led to the character of Senior, Uno's father in *Mexican WhiteBoy*. "One day I was on the subway riding from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and I was just minding my own business with an iPod on. This Puerto Rican father got on with his son, and his son I could tell had just done something wrong. I think he had been caught with marijuana at school. And the dad was working class, I think he worked for MTA [Metropolitan Transit Authority], and he was trying to tell his kid that this wasn't right. And he started saying all these crazy things, like literally he was saying, 'Man is his own best doctor, and you fake it till you make it,' and all these crazy things that didn't really make sense. But I was like, he's trying. He's trying to talk to his son.

"And then he literally came up with that spaghetti line about, 'If I cook spaghetti for you every single day, that's the same, but if one day I put meatballs in it, that's a change, and that change is in you, son, and that change is God.' And he said that word for word, and I turned down the volume on my iPod and wrote it down. Every single word of it. And then he became Senior.

"So I just love [that], because, I mean, you could sit there and say, 'Hey, this guy is not that smart, and this is making no sense, he's not helping this kid.' But in my mind I was like, I grew up with this guy, and the thing is, he's looking at his son, and he's talking to his son, and that's the most important thing. The language is kind of secondary."

No Kid Is Born Bad: We Were Here

Matt's newest book, *We Were Here*, explores the lives of three teenagers who meet in a group home where they've been sent after serving time in juvenile detention. Like all the other kids in the group home, Miguel, the main character, has committed a horrible crime—but unlike the others, his crime was an accident. Still, nothing can assuage the grief and self-loathing he feels, or the stigma of being a group home kid. Beneath his hostile attitude toward the counselors and other residents, Miguel is terrified of spending the rest of his life weighted down by guilt over what he's done.

In order to pass the time and escape the burden of his emotions, Miguel spends part of each day in the group home reading, but the only books available to him are the classics. Miguel doesn't mind; he actually likes reading. It's just that where he's from, it isn't cool to read a book unless a teacher's making you. The first book he pulls off the shelf is *The Color Purple*. The sadness and the beauty of the story blow him away.

As a novelist, Matt learned to capture that kind of intelligence through dialogue, embedding profound insights about the world into ordinary street dialect.

Matt said he gave Miguel *The Color Purple* to read because of the impact the book had on him after going through high school as a reluctant reader. "I had a professor my freshman year [in college at University of the Pacific] who said, 'Hey Matt, I want to give you this book, and I know you're on the road all the time, and I don't even want to give you a due date on this. But I want you to respond to this novel by the end of the semester.' And at first I was reading it and I was like, hey what's going on, why would she give me this book? This woman can't even speak proper English.

"But for the first time in my life, I finished a book in two days. That character moved me so much, I couldn't believe it. I was about to cry at the end. And I always tell people, I grew up in the kind of family where you don't cry as a male, like to the point where if you get hit by a car and your arm's laying across the street, still your dad will look at you and be like, you better not cry. So the fact that I was moved by a novel shocked me. And so *The Color Purple* is still—to this day, I feel like I owe so much to that novel. It totally changed my way of looking at books. And it made me a reader. So that was kind of fun, too, to have him discover literature." [13]

Matt also linked Miguel's decision to begin reading to the story of Malcolm X. "I thought of Malcolm X, when he's in prison. You want to get something out of that time that you have to serve. And so I felt like hey, Miguel, he wants to be alone. He also wants to gain something from this time. So instead of socializing with other kids, he gravitates towards books and being alone with them."

Reading may help Miguel to pass time in the group home, but it doesn't help him to come to terms with his grief, or figure out how he can ever make amends with his family. So when a crazy, violent Chinese kid named Mong invites Miguel to break out of the group home and run away to Mexico, Miguel figures that starting a new life is really his only option. He doesn't trust Mong, but he doesn't particularly care what happens to himself, either. When Miguel's roommate Rondell, a big black kid who doesn't appear to be very smart, asks if he can come along, too, Miguel doesn't care enough to say no.

Not only does Miguel agree to run away; he makes the situation worse by stealing all the group home's petty cash. He also steals his official file, along with Mong's and Rondell's. It's not something he thinks about; he grabs the files on impulse, perhaps because his relationship to his own file is so tormented. When Jaden, the counselor at the group home, first invites him to talk about what's recorded in the file, Miguel reacts defiantly:

> You bring people in here and talk and talk and talk. You open up their stupid-ass file and act like it has all the answers about 'em, and then you talk some more. But you don't know me, man. You don't know the first thing about who I am or where I come from. (50)

Jaden concedes that this is true, but he insists that he wants to help.

Miguel thinks about his file again after he and Mong and Rondell have run away from the group home and find themselves stranded in San Francisco. When they suddenly realize that they have no idea what they're going to do next, Miguel picks a fight with Mong, the person he blames for their circumstances. After the fight, Miguel stands at Fisherman's Wharf, watching the sea lions and worrying about who he's becoming in relation to his file:

> They had no clue who I was or how something inside me was changing by the minute, getting more and more angry and confused. They didn't know how I was becoming what people probably thought if they ever read my file, saw what I did . . . . Maybe it's a waste of damn time to fight what's in your file. Maybe you're destined to end up being that person no matter what. (100–101)

A few days later, after the three of them have spent the evening drinking and talking around a campfire on the beach, Miguel stays up late reading Mong's and Rondell's files. The impact on him is far more profound than he expected. In fact, he's stunned and horrified to learn about the traumatic experiences Mong and Rondell have had. "How's that even fair?" Miguel wonders. "To have so many bad things happen in one life" (136).

Matt's understanding of the role that juvenile offenders' files can play in their perceptions of themselves and in other people's perceptions of them arises from his own experience working as a counselor in a group home for a couple of years after college. Like Miguel, reading kids' files gave Matt a very different and far deeper understanding of who those group home kids were.

"I remember thinking, oh, this kid right here, he's just a little asshole, you know, he's a bad kid. And then that night, I would go in and read his file and find out that he'd had a stepfather who had raped him, or something amazingly difficult for any kid to ever deal with.

"And then you start to think about this and you say, wow, there's no kid that's born bad. Or, you know, if there are, maybe just a couple. Most kids have something happen to them that moves them in this direction, and it's almost like, it's easier for them to be bad because they feel like that's the way the world defined them. It makes more sense."[14]

Because of the bad things that Miguel and Mong and Rondell each have done, they struggle mightily to believe that their lives can still matter. Their recklessness, their detachment from adults who want to help them, and their tendency to fight are all manifestations of the underlying fear and sadness they live with each day. Consequently, there's more at stake in their journey from the group home to Mexico and beyond than the desire to start a new life. What they need to know is that they haven't been erased as human beings because of their crimes.

Matt put it this way: "Ultimately, that's all these kids want, that's their ultimate motivation, is for people to know they're there. For Rondell, he wants God to know he's there, because he thinks that God's important. But then Mong, when he carves [a saying] into the rock, he just . . . he understands that he's gone, and he just wants people to know that he existed. And Miguel, he was watching that, and he was taking all that in, and for him it's like, he would love nothing more than for his mother to acknowledge him, [to have his] family remember that he's there, and that he still exists. I think in the book in general, it's wanting to be seen. And wanting people to know that they existed."[15]

The Desire to Be Seen

Young people's desire to be seen is at the heart of all of Matt's work, and it's something Matt understands personally. He talked about what being seen meant to him in relation to the book *Mexican WhiteBoy*.

"Danny wants to be a great baseball player so that his dad will see him. And me, I think I wanted to become a writer so that my family would see me. But the interesting thing is my evolution in terms of that. I don't expect them to read [the book] anymore. I just expect that it's out in the world. It's on a bookshelf. It exists. They exist in that book, or I should say, we exist in that book, and that's enough."[16]

For urban teens who feel that their voices have gone unheard and the significance of their lives has gone unrecognized, Matt de la Peña's novels provide a powerful space of affirmation. The very existence of Matt's work is testimony to the fact that these teens' lives and voices matter. But Matt's novels don't just speak to urban teens. They also challenge readers whose lives have been shaped by race and class privilege to consider how the world looks to people who have less and live differently. As Matt reminds us, their lives are beautiful, too.

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Notes

[1] Interview with Shon Bacon, All the Blog's a Page, 2 September 2009.

[2] Personal email, 2 October 2009.

[3] Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.

[4] Gotham faculty profile page.

[5] Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.

[6] Blogtalk radio interview, 27 August 2009.

[7] Personal email, 2 October 2009.

[8] Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.

[9] Interview with Amy Bowllan, Bowllan's Blog, 31 August 2009.

[10] Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.

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