

## ***The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime that Changed Their Lives***

**A book review by John Franklin**

Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas

*The 57 Bus*, Dashka Slater’s 2017 journalistic investigation of a horrific event, is a 302-page exposition suitable for high school students as well as middle school readers who—while encountering puberty—experience conflict and curiosity about gender and sexual identity.

Set in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Oakland, California, the book confronts the conflicts among three kinds of justice: legal, restorative and social. It does so by relating a cast of characters including personifications (some identities are veiled to preserve privacy) of students from privileged, progressive, private Maybeck High School as opposed to students from underprivileged, challenging, public Oakland High School. The characters meet by way of public transportation, where the inciting incident occurs.

The plot recounts actual events—some recorded on video—leading to a skirt-wearing Maybeck HS student being set afire by a troubled Oakland HS student.

Afterward, the author objectively questions the value of our justice system when applied to a juvenile.

*The 57 Bus* would appeal to readers curious about cultural identity, including gender and sexual representation as well as economic and family dysfunction. More mature readers will enjoy the revelation of a legal system bent on punishing adults rather than understanding adolescents. All readers can learn from the forgiveness extended from the victim and their family to the perpetrator.

This book could easily meet KSDE Standards for Reading: Information. I envision lesson plans focusing on outward appearance at the level of clothing and fashion; on restorative justice as a system of raising awareness and resolving conflict—here the chapters called “Ass Smacking” (about an early adolescent improperly touching classmates) and “Restorative Justice” are particularly edifying; and, on the importance of sympathetic adults for adolescents in need of guidance.

Parents and other concerned community members might object to the matter-of-fact exposition of gender and sexual identity—here the glossary named “Gender, Sex, Sexuality, Romance: Some Terms” is invaluable for opening enlightening discussion—as well as the profane dialogue. Their challenges may be met by providing an alternate selection: *Touching Spirit Bear*, by Ben Mikaelson, which narrates the positive application of a Native-American construct called circle justice, an alternative form of justice focused on healing victims, perpetrators and the community.

What I like best about the book is its short chapters, organized into four parts: Sasha (about the victim); Richard (about the perpetrator); the fire (about the incident); and Justice (about its aftermath), with each part providing substantial, interesting information. Taken altogether the 2-3 page chapters outweigh the whole.

After finishing *The 57 Bus*, I felt that it was the most important book I read in 2018.

### **Author Biography**

John Franklin (BA Rice; MA Miami of Ohio; PhD Florida; Texas Teacher’s Certificate) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending twelve-week summers in Britain with a backpack or a bicycle visiting the settings of the fiction, drama and poetry he taught: London for Dickens; Scotland for *Macbeth*; Canterbury for Chaucer; and, the Lake District for Wordsworth. John Franklin is an Associate Professor of English, a Supervising Professor of English Education and the Director of the English Education Internship Program at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools. He can be reached at [jfranklin@pittstate.edu](mailto:jfranklin@pittstate.edu).