

YA Book Review

---

# ART OVERCOMES A DEHUMANIZING EXPERIENCE

---

**Sharon K. Wilson**

Fort Hays State University

*Punching the Air* (2020) by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam is an apt metaphor for 16-year-old Amal Shahid's struggle to find his voice and survive the gentrification and racial injustice in his neighborhood, a school system that does not address his creativity, and a corrupt, racially-biased criminal justice system. In these environments he is judged by assumptions because of his race.

Amal, a gifted poet and artist, attends a prestigious fine arts school, where he can develop his talents. However, instead of finding an outlet and support for his creativity, he is victimized by pre-conceived ideas of what a good artist should be. He becomes frustrated and angry at not being seen, "she won't see me/She's never seen me . . . as if me and what I create/are two different worlds" (p. 10). Later, he reflects, "I failed the class/She failed me" (p. 133).

His anger and feelings of powerlessness overwhelm him one night when he becomes the victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time when a fight breaks out. This event changes the trajectory of his life. Amal is victimized again by a racially biased criminal justice system. His lawyer is inept and his sentencing is unjust. He is convicted of assaulting a white boy, who is in a coma and can't substantiate Amal's innocence, so he is sent to a juvenile detention center, even though the victim's DNA was not on his skateboard.

In prison, he is subjected to dehumanizing conditions, victimization, violence from guards and other inmates, and systemic racism, which exacerbate his feelings of powerlessness. His ability to survive these conditions tests his humanity, his belief in himself, and his creativity. However, these feelings are ameliorated by his Muslim faith, the love and support of his family, especially his mother, encouraging letters from a friend, and support and protection from some other inmates who help him rediscover his talents.

The novel provides high school teachers with an opportunity for sustained inquiries into issues that affect teenagers: frustration with an educational system that does not address their needs and individuality; systemic racism; the injustice and dehumanization of the criminal justice system, and maintaining mental health in the face of overwhelming odds. The novel could be challenged on some of these issues because the violence and injustice Amal experiences from the court system, the guards, and fellow inmates is portrayed vividly and realistically.

Stylistically, the first-person, verse novel and the black and white illustrations convey the immediacy and intensity of Amal's conflicts, the themes of hope, the love of family, and the resilience of the human spirit. Ibi Zoboi, award-winning author of *American Street*, and Yusef Salaam,

reformer and member of the Exonerated Five, lyrically and poetically expose Amal's interior world and his ability to find and reaffirm his voice through poetry and art.

If teachers want to explore the journeys that portray realistic, flawed, yet resilient protagonists and their struggle to survive racial or cultural injustice, overcome the effects of a corrupt judicial system, while also expressing sensitivity to the issue of challenges from the community or elsewhere, then they could pair this novel with one or more of the following:

Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Poet X*;  
Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*;  
Melanie Crowder, *An Uninterrupted View of the Sky*;  
Tiffany Jackson, *Monday's Not Coming* or *Let Me Hear a Rhyme*;  
Jason Reynolds, *Long Way Down*;  
Jason Reynolds and Branden Kiely, *All American Boys*;  
Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* or *Dear Justyce*;  
Angie Thomas, *On the Come Up* or *The Hate U Give*;  
Renee Watson, *Piecing Me Together*;  
Ibi Zoboi, *American Street*.

### **Author Biography**

Sharon K. Wilson has been an Instructor in Fort Hays State University's English Department since 1981 and has also been Director of English Education. She has published several articles on YAL, inclusion, and diversity in journals that include *The Ethnic Studies Review: The Journal of the National Association for Ethnic Studies*, *Kansas English*, and *Salem Press*. In addition, she has presented several papers and conducted many panel presentations at national, state, and local conferences, such as The Big Read Program, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the 49th Annual Conference on Composition and Literature, the National Association of Ethnic Studies, KATE's Annual Conference, and The Fall English Workshop at FHSU. She also co-wrote and received a grant to design, implement, and organize a YAL summer reading program for the Hays Public Library, 1989-1995. She can be reached at [skwilson@fhsu.edu](mailto:skwilson@fhsu.edu).