



Dear Reader,

When I was eleven years old, my mom—in an effort to create a better life for myself, my brother, and my sister—moved us from Chelsea, Massachusetts, to York, Pennsylvania. As a single mom trying to raise three kids on a bartender’s tips, she saw this as an opportunity to escape poverty. She had met a truck driver who promised more for her and her children, only to have us all live in a motel for a month before settling in a trailer park. We moved from one type of poverty to another.

The move occurred in the middle of the school year, and so I had that uncomfortable experience of walking into a new classroom and peering out at a group of strangers who watched me with skeptical eyes as I introduced myself. I looked and sounded much different from my new classmates.

Fortunately I had a kind and caring teacher, Mr. Downs, who helped me feel welcomed and encouraged my love of reading.

While I eventually made friends and excelled academically, I never truly felt like I fit in. The seeds of my lifelong imposter syndrome were planted by poverty but grew as a result of these formative childhood years.

While my personal experience was the inspiration for *America’s Dreaming*, it is one that is all too common.

Every year, approximately five million children will enter a new school in the United States. Over 70 percent of children will change schools before high school. Almost 15 percent attend four or more schools.

There are long-term implications when a child does not feel welcomed in school. It has been correlated with increased depression, mental health issues, and dropout rates. The impact is felt hardest by children of little means.

Teachers around the country, like Mr. Downs, do heroic work in trying to make all children feel at home at school. Yet, they often go unrecognized. In my case, it took me many years to finally reach out to Mr. Downs and thank him for his kindness. Sadly, when I finally found him, I learned that he had died two weeks prior.

Books play a central role in telling stories about people—real and imagined—who share a difficult experience that a child may be facing AND providing counsel, hope, and inspiration on how these experiences can be overcome. This book features several of these characters who represent the best of us.

America, the country, has always represented a land of opportunity and a chance at a better life. It is why people against great odds and obstacles leave their homes and bring their families here. Despite the symbolism and the message enshrined at the base of the Statue of Liberty, we have not always been as welcoming as our ideals profess. We breed fear of the foreign, tease those unlike us, or even bully those brave enough to stand up and stand out. By “we” I’m not referring to just our unknowing children but to the environment in which they are being raised.

The choice to name the title character America and yet never to show what they look like is deliberate. It doesn’t matter whether a child moves from one city, state, or country to another. Nor does it matter what their gender, race, or class is.

It is important that *all* children feel like they belong. Not just in our schools, but in our communities and our country.

*America’s Dreaming* is not only a mirror and a window for children, but a love letter to teachers, and a reminder of our nation’s history—one that is rooted in the idea that we are stronger when we welcome others with open arms and hearts.

We all wish for our children to find belonging. It was my dream many years ago, and it is America’s dream today.

With gratitude,

Bob McKinnon

