

Book Backgrounder: **PRECIOUS CARGO** by **CRAIG DAVIDSON**

Note for teachers

PLEASE NOTE: This document contains spoilers!

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on Curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.

Literacy strategy

If you are using this book backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words they find and research their meaning.



Today, Craig Davidson is a celebrated author whose novels have been adapted into major films and nominated for the Giller and other significant awards. But in the summer of 2008, Craig was broke and trying to write unsuccessfully. Times were tough and so when an ad asking for applications for school bus drivers landed in his mailbox, Craig called the number. So begins *Precious Cargo*, which chronicles the year Craig spends driving the group of special needs kids on bus 3077 — who change his life in totally unexpected ways.

Above all, Craig learns that those who may seem most defenceless often have alarming reserves of inner strength, self-love and resilience. Moreover, Craig’s “precious cargo” teaches him how to achieve greater acceptance of self and circumstance in his own right — despite the relative ease with which he can move through life and society. As Craig writes, “Who wants to read about a red-haired schlub whose life has been comparatively uneventful and privileged? So I write about characters struggling to surmount circumstances I’ve never faced, calling upon a strain of willpower and inner strength I have never possessed, not for one minute.”



Watch Craig Davidson discuss his book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads



Primary Characters

Craig. Goofy, kind and somewhat hapless Craig feels like a reliable narrator. He is honest, even when an honest account makes him look foolish. He tells the reader about the wrong-headed assumptions he makes about the kids on his bus, and about their ability to handle adversity. But through it all, his devotion to them is clear.

Jake. The passenger on Craig's bus with whom he develops the closest relationship, Jake has a truly tragic past. Jake has cerebral palsy and suffers from spastic quadriplegia, which means all four of his limbs are affected by his CP and he is wheelchair-bound. Shortly before *Precious Cargo* begins, Jake and his mother are struck by a drunk driver and his mother is killed. When Craig meets Jake, he is still suffering from his injuries as a result of the accident. Jake is charming, smart and an aspiring writer. He and Craig develop a close bond throughout the book, and Jake's ability to cope with the profound tragedy he has endured is a constant source of amazement for Craig.

Oliver. A 13-year-old with Fragile X Syndrome, a condition that can lead to delayed physical, mental and emotional development, as well as hypersensitivity to touch. Incessantly chatty, Gavin is a compulsive liar, but in an endearing way that leaves him well liked by all the other kids on the bus. Among all the kids, he is perhaps most oblivious to the way he is perceived by others.

Gavin. A virtually non-verbal autistic thirteen-year-old, who communicates with his bus mates

primarily through body language and “bird-like noises,” as Craig describes them. Over time, Craig starts communicating with Gavin by serenading him with alternate lyrics to popular songs — something Gavin loves.

Nadja. A 17-year-old South Asian girl with a penchant for pink and a tendency to tell outlandish stories about lavish dinner parties and unlikely deaths in the family. To Nadja, everything is “nice,” and reality is malleable. As Craig puts it, “Other than a slight speech impediment...and a certain repetitiveness in regard to her word choices, Nadja looked and sounded like any other 17-year-old” (p. 65).

Vincent. A grade 12 student who speaks with a memorable drawl (e.g. “thaaaaaat’s me”) and possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of *Star Wars*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *Star Trek*.

Calvin. Jake's dad. British, handsome, stoic. Craig is somewhat in awe of his ability to cope with loss and tragedy and stress...much like his son's.

The Ending

In the end, Craig decides this will be his only year driving the bus, which the kids on board seem to understand, by and large. In an interview years later, Craig said, “I look back on that experience like summer jobs and summer camp. It's a really close connection because you spend a lot of time together, plus you also know there's a finite end, and the jokes and laughs — and the heartbreak — were all a product of that.”



Key Themes

DISABILITY, DIFFERENCE

Precious Cargo is about a group of kids who just do not fit in. Sometimes for obvious, highly visible reasons (e.g. Jake's wheelchair) and sometimes for less apparent reasons having to do with their social or cognitive skills. But it's also a story about a group of kids who don't always care that they don't fit in. Contrary to Craig's expectations, these kids are not defined by their difference — or if they are, they're not always unhappy with the outcome. It's just a fact of their lives, for the most part, not something that greatly inhibits their happiness.

BULLYING

Craig is appalled by how the kids on his bus are treated. And although the ways in which they are bullied often seem to bother them less than they bother Craig, there are still a number of instances where their experiences are truly frustrating to read about, and a reminder of how harsh young people can be towards peers who don't fit in.

STORYTELLING

Just as storytelling is an escape for Craig as a writer, it is an escape for many of his charges. Jake wants to be an author himself one day. On the bus, Oliver and Nadja tell outrageous tales about their lives that everyone on the bus knows are massively untrue, but which no one calls them out on. Storytelling is such an important form of self-expression and self-acceptance for these young people who are marked by their otherness in so many ways.

Notable Quotes from Reviews

"Being on a 'short bus' is not a chore for them, but a choice: it's their safe haven away from the crap they must endure in the world. In short order, Davidson becomes not just their chauffeur, but their champion and chief defender, stopping the bus to confront idiots making 'retard' jokes or laughing at the kids on the bus, though after one particularly ridiculous encounter, he realizes that the kids are all right — they don't need him to defend them because they've been doing it for themselves all of their lives...Spending time each school day for months in the company of kids who will never be ordinary by society's standards makes him realize how extraordinary they really are. He also recognizes in them a similar need to tell stories, to stretch their existences beyond the bounds of whatever limitations they're facing."

—Dory Cerny, Quill & Quire

"Again and again, at least until he realizes it doesn't accomplish anything, he pulls his bus to the side of the road to climb out and confront children and adults who laugh at the 'tard bus' as it noses by. The children are bullied but never bully back, the slow grace of their incapacities having streamlined and ennobled their lives. They are nevertheless surprised, even impressed, that their able-bodied driver is so volatile and easily goaded. As Jake points out, from the clarifying vantage point of his wheelchair, anger rarely gets him anywhere. Turns out Craig Davidson has a wheelchair of his own — his temper."

— Ian Brown, The Globe and Mail

“At its essence, *Precious Cargo* is an anthem to self-acceptance. That may not seem to be one of life’s most complex tasks. But for a lot of us, it is. So maybe Didion got it wrong. Craig Davidson didn’t sell out his charges by ‘exploiting’ their lives as ‘material’ for his book. He enriched them, and us, by making their imperfections ennobling — and life enhancing.” – [Robert Collison, The Toronto Star](#)



CBC / Other Links

Why Craig Davidson doesn't let criticism get to him (CBC Books: Magic 8 questionnaire):

www.cbc.ca/books/why-canada-reads-longlisted-author-craig-davidson-doesn-t-let-criticism-get-to-him-1.4489215

Craig Davidson: My year driving a special-needs school bus (CBC Books: How I Wrote It blog post):

www.cbc.ca/books/craig-davidson-my-year-driving-a-special-needs-school-bus-1.4063931

Craig Davidson shares the lessons he learned driving a school bus (The Next Chapter interview):

www.cbc.ca/1.4546695

What one man discovered while spending a year driving a school bus, 'a chamber of shared confidences':

<http://nationalpost.com/entertainment/books/what-one-man-discovered-while-spending-a-year-driving-a-school-bus-a-chamber-of-shared-confidences>

Critical Thinking Questions

Students may need to do some research to help them create and organize an answer.



1. Look at the title of the book. What could the story be about?
2. Who is Craig Davidson? Why is he writing this book?
3. What lessons can others learn from people in their communities who possess physical and intellectual challenges? What lessons have you learned?
4. What is the importance of an honest narrator? What are the positives and negatives of having an honest narrator?
5. What does bullying look like, feel like and sound like? What motivates someone to bully? How do bullies learn the behaviour? Why do you think some people find themselves in a position where they are bullied? How do we as a society prevent bullying? Can bullying be stopped or is an reality of the human experience?
6. Who are the unsung heroes in the world we live in today?
7. Have you ever avoided interacting with someone because of a perceived difference between you? Why? What might have enabled you to feel you could approach that person?

Activities

1. Students can create a KWL (i.e. **K**now, **W**ant to Know, **W**ill **L**ook/**L**earn) chart on the subject of people living with disabilities.
2. Students can research the services that their communities and province provide for people living with disabilities.
3. With a partner, students can discuss and explore answers to the following*:
 - What is the definition of the word disability?
 - What are some examples of physical disabilities?
 - What questions do you have about certain disabilities?
 - What are some of your ideas or thoughts when it comes to encountering people with disabilities?

Students should record their answers.

*This short activity is adapted from the Understanding Disabilities lesson plan on the Teaching Tolerance website: www.tolerance.org/

1. Students can create a T-Chart outlining their positive and negative impressions of the content in the backgrounder, as well as any questions the backgrounder inspires them to ask.
2. Teachers: if the opportunity is available, consider working with a teacher from a Developmentally Delayed/Multiple Exceptionalities class to plan a shared experience for students in your classes.

