



Armstrong & Charlie

Steven B. Frank

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Charlie isn't looking forward to sixth grade. After all, if he starts sixth grade, chances are he'll finish it. And when he does, he'll be older than his older brother ever was. Armstrong isn't looking forward to sixth grade, either. This year, he'll have to wake up at 5:30 to ride a bus to an all-white school in the Hollywood Hills.

When Armstrong and Charlie are assigned seats next to each other, what starts as a rivalry becomes a close friendship. Set in Los Angeles in the 1970s, *Armstrong and Charlie* is the hilarious, heartwarming tale of two boys from opposite worlds. Different, yet the same.

Armstrong & Charlie Details

Date : Published March 7th 2017 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN :

Author : Steven B. Frank

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Childrens, Middle Grade, Realistic Fiction, Race, Fiction, Social Issues, Humor, Young Adult, Cultural

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From Reader Review *Armstrong & Charlie* for online ebook

Ivonne Rovira says

Although set 40 years ago, *Armstrong and Charlie* remains as relevant as yesterday's police shooting of an unarmed black teen — or this morning's borderline-racist Donald Trump tweet. Sure, the novel presents coming-of-age stories for two 12-year-olds: white Charlie Ross, the son of Jewish politically progressive parents, all of whom are still mourning the death of Charlie's brother Andy a few months earlier, and black Armstrong Leroy, the hot-tempered son of a disabled veteran who left a leg in Korea and picked up post-traumatic stress disorder. The pair, who would otherwise have never met, do so when Armstrong's parents agree to Opportunity Busing, which sends a dozen kids from the projects to tony Wonderland Junior High in Laurel Canyon, home of Frank Zappa, Jerry Brown, Joni Mitchell, Carole King and fabled Mulholland Drive. Armstrong and Charlie are antagonists from the very start, with neither ready to give an inch.

But *Armstrong and Charlie* isn't a TV Afternoon Special: there are no easy resolutions to overcoming the frictions induced by class and race. The novel remains believable throughout, hopeful without becoming Pollyannaish or maudlin. Because of that, this novel might shine a beacon of hope at a time when schools have been re-segregating at an alarming pace.

While it isn't quite like any of them, *Armstrong and Charlie* should join *A Separate Peace*, *The Chocolate War*, *Wonder*, and *Harriet the Spy* as another classic that explores schools and injustice. Highly, highly recommended.

Michelle (FabBookReviews) says

4.5 stars

Armstrong & Charlie, the middle grade debut of Steven B. Frank has already received high praise with a starred review from Kirkus. A fantastic historical novel with two protagonists you'll not forget, *Armstrong & Charlie* seamlessly combines serious heartache and humour to tell the story of two young boys who meet during school desegregation in 1970s California.

We meet Armstrong Le Rois and Charlie Ross as they set out to start sixth grade at a Los Angeles school called Wonderland. Both boys are beginning their new school year under stressful, difficult circumstances, and in alternating first-person narratives, we experience and follow their often turbulent connection as their paths cross over and over again in and out of school. For Armstrong, he, as well as a few other students from South Central LA, will be integrated into a white school in the Hollywood Hills as part of an Opportunity Busing program. For Charlie, the start of the sixth grade means starting a school year at Wonderland without his brother and with the terrifying realization that he's soon going to have lived longer and get to experience more than his beloved older brother ever had the chance to. A story replete with *substance*, era and significant historical movements, Frank has more than capably interwoven the unforgettable voices and personal heartbreak of Charlie and Armstrong as they experience and navigate their new surroundings. Through the main characters' incredible, engrossing voices, *Armstrong & Charlie* explores everything from grief, death, trauma, racism, bullying, as well as family, loyalty, and adolescent matters of the heart. Frank navigates through Charlie and Armstrong's experiences of ugliness and happiness, moments of soaring and

moments of dishonour with grace, insight, and some unexpected and satisfying humour.

Overall, *Armstrong & Charlie* is a standout read. Well-written, focused, rich with exceptional characters and a terrifically done dual-narrative, Steven B. Frank has done a super job with his children's debut. Readers who enjoy the excellent offerings of children's authors such as Firoozeh Dumas, Rebecca Stead, Karen Harrington, Kwame Alexander, Erin Entrada Kelly, or Sarah Weeks, or readers who enjoy historical or hard-hitting, significant middle grade lit might especially love this wonderful story.

I received a copy of this title courtesy of Raincoast Books in exchange for an honest review. All opinions and comments are my own.

Kellyanne says

I received a copy from NetGalley for early review.

The focus is the desegregation of a California school in 1975. Two boys, Charlie and Armstrong, come from different walks of life. Over the course of the book, their friendship develops in surprising, challenging, and sometimes subtle ways. This book challenges racial assumptions and generalizations still unfortunately often made today. The two protagonists are well-developed, as are several supporting characters. There was one event that occurred mid-book that I thought would come into play again at the end, but it didn't. That said, it in no way affected how moving the book was.

I would definitely recommend this read for all middle grades. It's excellent.

Liz Friend says

The story: Armstrong is getting bused to a different school in LA in the fall of 1973. Charlie's always been there, and he doesn't know what to think of the black kids who are volunteering to come all the way across town. He also doesn't know what to think about Armstrong, who's kind of a Rebel while Charlie's more of a Rules Boy. Even so, as the kids get to know each other, they find out they're more alike than they could ever have guessed.

June Cleaver's ratings: Language PG-13; Violence PG; Sexual content PG; Nudity G; Substance abuse PG; Magic & the occult G; GLBT content G; adult themes (racial segregation, death of a sibling/child) PG; overall rating PG.

Liz's comments: I liked the story a lot, and you could tell that the author actually went to this school and lived some of these experiences, because he gets them exactly right. It did seem, however, that the characters were a little older than sixth grade--Armstrong's advice to Charlie about getting a kiss with some tongue seems to me to belong more to 8th graders, and the frequent appearance of words like "dumbass" renders this better for MS readers than ES kids. Still, I really did like it, and there's a lot here that's still relevant 40 years later.

Ms. Yingling says

ARC from publisher at ALA

It's 1975, and while some middle school problems are the same (weird teachers, school lunches, annoying parents), some are very different. Charlie lives in upscale Laurel Canyon, and right before 6th grade is to start, he finds out that many of his friends are going to other schools. The reason? Black children are going to be bused to Wonderland Avenue Elementary school. Charlie's mom doesn't have much of an opinion, because she is still reeling from Charlie's brother's allergy related death. Charlie's dad thinks this is a good thing-- he fought at the end of WWII and employs blacks at his medical supply business, and wants Charlie to be accepting, especially since there were times when he experienced prejudice because he is Jewish. Armstrong is to take the bus in and doesn't want to leave his old school. Things get off to a rocky start, partially because of racial issues, but more because there are a fair number of new students introduced to a longstanding population. Charlie and Armstrong have an odd bond-- Charlie overhears Armstrong tell a story about his neighbor, Mr. Khalil, dying. The story turns out to be false, but Charlie admires Armstrong's deviousness and creativity, and Armstrong feels bad that he made up the story when he finds out that Charlie's brother really did die. There's a humorous incident involving Ho Hos (the snack cake) that goes down the same way, and when students who are bused are supposed to spend the night closer to the school before a big class trip, Charlie's father invites Armstrong. The boys bond more during the class trip, and come to an easier alliance. Their relationship is imperiled when Charlie's father is held up at his business by two black men and becomes very afraid, but it is this incidence that sets the whole family on the road to healing.

First of all, I have to buy this because of the description of cleaning white wall tires! That was always my job, and I hated it as much as Charlie does. Small historical touches, like using land lines, biking around without supervision, and reading from SRA cards, make this a great choice. It is how the racial issues are addressed, however, that makes this brilliant. Things aren't easy, but they aren't horrible, either. The issue of busing was covered well from both sides, and the attitudes were very much in line with what I remember growing up. (I'm probably about 2 years younger than the author.) It's hard to get a good balance-- this book will make some readers uncomfortable, especially the scene where there is an interracial kiss and tensions fly. But it's brilliantly done. Is the boy really made that the boy who kissed the girl he likes is black, or that the girl he likes seems to have enjoyed the kissed? These issues are never simple, and middle grade readers are sophisticated enough to understand this.

The role of the fathers is interesting as well. Charlie's served at the end of WWII, and Armstrong's father lost a leg in Korea, and this shapes the way they treat their children. There were other interesting adult characters as well-- the lonely but helpful Mr. Khalil, and the poor beleaguered aide, Edwina Gaines, who writes hysterical incident reports when things go wrong at school.

The only thing that I disliked about this was the inclusion of the brother's death, and the mother's dysfunctional way of dealing with that, but that is a personal issue. It was addressed fairly lightly in the book, and the mother does finally get her act together.

Armstrong and Charlie is a must read for middle grade students who are trying to figure out their own place in the world, since that's exactly what these characters are trying to do. They're just trying to do it in a world where there are banana seats on bicycles and peanut butter in every sandwich in the lunch room. 6th grade is still about learning to spread the Ho Hos around, and good historical fiction manages to show students that while things may change, they really stay very much the same.

Brandi says

I obtained the audio edition of Steven B. Frank's "Armstrong & Charlie" from a Goodreads giveaway. Ruffin Prentiss, Christopher Gebauer, and Karen Chilton did an excellent job with the narration. I also enjoyed the historical/educational aspects of this story as I have learned that works such as this can encourage young readers to research and learn about the events that are depicted. Even as an adult, I can become intrigued by events mentioned in books and have researched them in order to learn about them. I definitely give "Armstrong & Charlie" a thumbs up! Young readers/listeners should enjoy the engaging story and will probably relate, in many ways, to the two protagonists.

Danielle says

"I'll just say it's a book that tells the truth." (p. 265)

This book is terrific—layered, well-written, and feels true.

Jessica says

Thanks to Netgalley for the ARC! I'm so happy I sometimes judge books by covers because this one sucked me in, and what it contained did not disappoint. Here's one of those books I'm lucky enough to grab before it makes it big, and I'm excited to see this one make it big. If it doesn't, it will be a sin. This author weaves a tale that at times could be "juggling too many balls," if you will, with so many different pieces to the plot, but he never lets any of them drop. What you get is a story about friendship, acceptance, and a group of pre-teenagers I feel like I now know. There's two very different (& yet so similar) families who fight and banter and feel so real. There's not too much 70's thrown at you (sometimes books set in specific time periods shove it down your throat with the references to certain clothes and hairstyles), and I wasn't annoyed to have to wait a while to find out what really happened to Charlie's brother. No one goes through profound, complete life changes that leave you with rainbow happy endings, but these boys mature and change as 6th graders do, & their relationship was everything I hoped it would be (within the realms of reality!). The book did have some profanity (limited but still there, though the boys do have to put \$ in the swear jar when it happens). The racism was handled well for a middle grade book, & Charlie's family is a great example of understanding equality. I really enjoyed the character of Mr. Kahlil and what he did for Armstrong as well because it showed that influences and good examples also don't have to be immediate family. I devoured this book in two evenings, and I stayed up late to finish it tonight, even though my youngest is an early riser. The fact that I'll accept that punishment shows the worth of this read. This book better g**da** be a best seller because it's worth the \$ in the swear jar.

Kelly says

I thought this book was phenomenal. For someone who doesn't read much in print, this book really hooked me. I didn't check it out the first day I started reading it at work, and I was thinking about it that evening and

the mistake I had made. Checked it out next day. I would recommend this book to people who liked *Because of Mr. Terupt* to people who liked *Revolution* by Deborah Wiles. Plenty of it takes place in school and plenty takes place in a well-off and then in a poor, black neighborhood. It's about civil rights and friendship.

Ashlee Tominey says

Middle grade historical fiction novel about two boys from very different neighborhoods in California in the 70s brought together by "opportunity busing".

Loved the character development and the budding friendships. A few uneasy moments as the boys try to figure out what kind of people they want to be. Plenty of laugh out loud moments.

My 3 year old picked it up from the New shelf at the library and handed it to me. Glad I stuck it in my bag and checked it out.

Jess says

This book was fantastic. I loved it. It was right up my alley-- a mix between *Remember the Titans* and *Wonder* by Palacio (at least as far as family relationships go), and maybe a little bit like the movie *Sandlot*. Quite funny and sweet and sad.

Likes: The interactions between Charlie and Armstrong and each of them with their respective families was awesome. I loved it. I loved how much the secondary characters added to the narrative. It was just a very pleasant book to read.

Dislikes: None to mention.

Keep Calm Novel On says

NetGalley provided a copy of the ePub in exchange for an honest review.

Steven B. Frank's middle-grade novel *Armstrong and Charlie* is a powerful read with an important message. It is written for young readers but will certainly be enjoyed by all.

Armstrong and Charlie are beginning sixth grade in the 1970s. They live in Los Angeles and they are not familiar with each other's world. Charlie lives a comfortable life but has experienced personal loss. Armstrong will be bussed to a white school away from his neighbourhood. Their first encounter is challenging and their journey is filled with the honesty of youth. This well-written novel examines racism, bereavement, bullying, and true friendship. *Armstrong and Charlie* is a quick read that does not disappoint.

Peg says

What a remarkable story, much better than I anticipated. Once I began reading I found it difficult to put down. Having just begun my career as an educator in the early 70s, I can remember when busing began along with all the controversy.

Armstrong and Charlie is definitely a work of historical fiction. It has the ability to take you back to that point in time. From white wall tires to landlines and SRA reading cards. How they take me back. Even the music was representative of the time. I did find myself singing!

The relationship between Armstrong (the rebel) and Charlie (the rules boy) was developed beautifully. Two boys who are very different yet the same. It begins the first day Armstrong reluctantly steps off the bus at Wonderland Elementary School, a white school in the Hollywood Hills - a result of Operation Busing. Charlie was the more serious of the two whereas Armstrong had a humorous way about him and there was ample humor. But their story also dealt with serious subject matter: bullying, trust, death and grieving, prejudice and it's fears along with showing the importance and effect of strong family bonds and true friendships.

We are also exposed to all the angst associated with this age along with the heartache as emotions develop and first love makes itself known.

Did I like the story? Yes

Would I recommend it? Absolutely

A totally relatable story well worth 5 stars!

Skip says

1970's California. Armstrong's parents decide he should be bused to a "white" school where he can get a better education, and perhaps put some distance between him and his many sisters. Charlie's friends are going to different schools, and he is kind of adrift. The two basically spend much of the book competing against each other in many normal adolescent ways, which after a certain point, became irksome. Happily, they are supported by a strong group of well developed characters, particularly family. I liked the way the book developed and Frank's portrayal of the teens, which probably comes from teaching kids this age. The book is clearly autobiographical as Frank found himself in this situation when he was in middle school.

Jenni says

4.5 stars.

Yay! Thanks to Stephen B. Frank and Goodreads Giveaways I will be receiving a signed copy of this book! I can't wait to read it when it gets here!

Now that I have read this book, I am even more delighted that I now have a signed copy. This was a really well written book, set in the 1970's. There was a bit of a nostalgic factor for me that I'm sure influenced my opinion, as I was in 6th grade during that time as well.

The 2 titular characters were very well developed, and I cared about both of them from very early on. Conflicts were handled in a realistic manner. Some of the things the kids did seemed like they were older than 6th grade, based on my current almost-7th grader's experiences, but when I think back to MY 6th grade

year, they seemed very plausible. It was a different time back then, and kids had more freedom than I think they do now. There is a bit of mild swearing, but nothing most 6th graders haven't heard - or likely said.

This is I think the 4th book this year that I've read that deals with race relations, and the first written for this age group. All of them have been well done, and all are, I think, a timely read with all that is going on now. I hope that this book finds its way into many children's hands - and adults as well.

Thank you again to the author for taking the time to sign a copy for me.
