

Title: *Free Lunch*  
Author: Rex Ogle  
Genre: Autobiography

**Reviewer Name and Grade: Rachel G. 8th grade**

**Date Reviewed: March 1, 2020**

Set in a wealthy suburban town, our protagonist, Rex Ogle is starting middle school. But there's a catch; his family depends on food stamps and government provided free school lunch. Rex is embarrassed to let anyone know of his financial situation, and hates having to say "free lunch" at the cafeteria checkout. He feels the social pressures to fit in, just like most teens, but also has to deal with rough physical and emotional abuse at home from his mom and stepdad, Sam. Rex and his five year old brother, Ford, have little clothes or possessions, and Rex often goes hungry to school so Ford can have more food. He sleeps in a sleeping bag on the floor, and wakes up with cockroaches in the room. His grandmother bought them food, and offers a small amount of financial support, However, his mom refuses out of pride, saying that they don't need her charity. He sheds light on many important issues that teens face, such as peer pressure to drink alcohol or do drugs. Rex drifts from some old friends, but also makes new friends, like Ethan, who helps him realize that nobody has a perfect life, because we all have problems. Unfortunately, his family gets evicted and put into government regulated housing near his school. Towards the end of the book, things finally start to look up for Rex's family, when his mom gets a job at a new chinese restaurant. His parents start to fight less, Rex starts to see his mom happy and less stressed, and they even get presents on Christmas! The book ends when Rex realizes that there is nothing to be ashamed of regarding being poor. He proudly says "free lunch" to the lunch lady, and seems ready to start a new chapter.

*Did the plot keep you interested?* The plot kept me intrigued, and was so good that I finished the book in 1 day! I liked how relatable the protagonist is, and I found it very realistic. It provided a new perspective for me, and opened up my eyes regarding poverty in America.

*Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?* I thought the pace of the book was just right, and I was able to easily follow what was going on. The chapters seemed to flow from one to the next.

*What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?* I think that this book is best suited for grades 7-10 because it does contain issues like drugs and abuse, and has some strong language. I think that for the most part this book would be interesting from young teens to adults because of the topic, but is an easier read for some.

*What type of reader would you recommend this book to?* I would recommend this book to a reader who enjoys realistic fiction, and is interested in learning about current issues.

*What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?* I think that it is important to note that this is actually a true story, and is almost like a memoir.

I would rate this book 5 stars because I'm very glad I read it. I now have a new perspective on poverty and hunger, and can really appreciate the fact that I am able to have food on the table. For example, Rex is not able to eat breakfast, snacks, or a very big dinner, which is something most of us have not experienced. I also enjoyed seeing the characters develop as the story went on, such as Rex becoming less embarrassed of his family and his mom getting a job.

**Reviewer Name and Grade: Annabella S. 7th grade**

**Date Reviewed: May 11, 2020**

The true story, *Free Lunch*, takes place in the present and is about a young boy named Rex. Rex lives with his mom, his step dad named Sam, and his little brother named Ford. They live in a 2 bedroom apartment in Texas, that is very small and full of bugs. Not only does Rex face the challenges of the average sixth grader, he faces issues at home too. After his dad left him, his mom got together with Sam. At first everything was fine but then Sam and Rex's mom started fighting a lot. Not only would they hurt each other, but they would hurt Rex too. Rex constantly had a black eye and bruises all over from his family abusing him. He also got mentally abused too. The way Rex gets treated at home is heartbreaking to say the least. Rex often had to do a lot of things for his family that adults would normally be responsible for. Some things that Rex had to do were take care of his brother and cook for the family. Another problem that Rex had to face everyday was that he would often go hungry. Throughout most of the story, neither of his parents had jobs. They never had enough money for food, so that meant that Rex would often go without meals. Rex was very ashamed that he was poor, even though it is something that he can not control. He would always feel humiliated having to announce that he was in the free lunch program every day. He hated that he had to go to school in second hand clothes that were always too big on him. Rex did not want anyone to know that his family was not financially stable. Will Rex's terrible situation ever get better? Read the book to find out.

*Did the plot keep you interested?*

The plot definitely kept me interested. There was never a dull moment in the story. I think that the author did a very good job because the book was very engrossing and once I finished a chapter, I could not wait to see what was in the next chapter.

*Was the pace of this book too fast, too slow, or just right?*

The pace of this book was just right. As I was reading this book, I did not feel like any of the scenes went too fast or too slow.

*What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?*

This book is appropriate for grades 6 through 12. This book consists of some very mature topics, so I would not recommend this book for anyone who is younger than 6th grade.

*What type of reader would you recommend this book to?*

I would recommend this book to readers that like realistic fiction. I would also recommend this book to readers that like true stories.

*What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?*

One piece of information that would be helpful to teens is that this book does not have very hard vocabulary. So if you are struggling with reading, this is still a great book for you.

*I would rate this book 4 stars.*

The reason I rated this book 4 stars is because it is a very good book but it is not my favorite. One thing that the author did very well was making the story relatable. This is shown on page four, "When mom steers our old two-door toyota hatchback in front of Kroger, I mumble, *I hate grocery shopping.*" Many teens can relate to this because most teens hate going grocery

shopping. Another example of this is on page 13, “Having the same mom makes Ford my baby brother. He’s not a baby, but he sure acts like it. He’s two and a half and about the most annoying kid I ever met. I still love him though, cause he’s my brother and I have to.” Many teens can relate to this because most teens think their siblings are annoying, but they still love them.

**Reviewer’s Name and Grade: Benjamin W., 9<sup>th</sup> Grade**

**Date Reviewed: October 18, 2020**

This book takes place in Birmingham, Alabama. The main character goes to a wealthy school district even though he is poor and lives in an apartment complex called Vista Nueva.

Starting middle school was something Rex Ogle was looking forward to but his family’s poverty turns it into a nightmare. His run down shoes and clothes cause teachers to think that he’s trouble and his old friends have found new friends that came from other elementary schools. His mom won’t let him play football even though his stepfather approves. To make matters worse, his mom has signed him up for a government provided free lunch program. Rex is embarrassed at having to say “free lunch” during the cafeteria checkout and is scared one of his old friends will find out about his financial situation. Rex sleeps in a sleeping bag on the floor and is usually hungry because he gives most of his food to his little brother Ford. The only times he isn’t is when his grandmother comes over. She always brings lots of food and gifts but Rex’s mom doesn’t accept them out of pride. Rex’s mom and his stepfather both don’t have jobs and they rely on scamming fast food restaurants and food stamps to get food. As the school year goes on, Rex’s mom turns worse and the family is eventually forced to move to a government provided housing complex with really low rent. This makes life even harder for Rex as he now has to wait until everyone has left school before he can head home to prevent anybody from seeing where he lives. Eventually, both Rex’s mom and his stepdad find work and life becomes a little easier for them.

Along the way, Rex meets a kid named Ethan. Ethan is wealthy but everyone thinks he’s weird because he’s kind of a nerd. Ethan helps Rex realize that nobody’s life is perfect and befriends Rex because he also has no friends. Together, they discuss comic books and Rex finally begins to enjoy school. The story ends with Rex proudly saying to the lunch lady “free lunch” without trying to hide it.

Now, I will answer some questions about the book:

*Did the plot keep you interested?* - This plot definitely kept me interested. There were a lot of fights both with words and with fists that made me want to find out what it would all lead to. The plot was really good and kept me wondering how it would end. The author made it that you could really understand the character and feel bad for what he was going through.

*Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?* - I think the pace of this book was just right. The story flowed smoothly from one day to another and there wasn’t too much that went on in one day that would make the story hard to follow.

*What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?* - I think this book is appropriate for kids in grades 7-12. This book has racism, abuse, and drug problems in it that wouldn't make it appropriate for younger kids. Older kids will enjoy it because they will understand these problems better and that will make the plot easier to understand.

*What type of reader would you recommend this book to?* - I would recommend this book to readers who like realistic fiction books because although this book is an autobiography, it would be realistic fiction if the book was about a made up character.

*What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book* - This book is about the actual experience of the author as a kid in a wealthy school district in Texas.

I would rate this book *5 stars*. The plot was really good and easy to follow. Everything was clear and I could really get to know the character. It opened my eyes on the conditions of other parts of the United States and I really don't have anything bad to say about this book.