

A Review of *Skin Again*, written by bell hooks, illustrated by Chris Raschka

Raschka and hooks, who teamed up for *Be Boy Buzz*, weigh superficial appearance against deep knowing in this warm but insubstantial meditation on skin. "The skin I'm in/ is just a covering./ It cannot tell my story," say the characters. A peachy pink hand and a chocolate brown hand reach from opposite directions across the width of a spread, and grab hold of one another: "If you want to know who I am/ you have got to come inside/ and open your heart way wide." In Raschka's exuberant paintings, an unpeeled-onion motif implies the multiplicity of stories beneath a person's visible surface, and dancing children, with varied hues of skin and reckless swirls of hair, suggest common interests and love. With torn paper rectangles, Raschka establishes quilty grids on the pages, and limns his characters in wide brushstrokes within these boxy spaces. Jazzy dashes and daubs of earth-tone paint suggest African batik or Aboriginal art. Yet the multiracial characters do not merge as hooks's poem suggests. Although they gaze wide-eyed at readers and each other, most remain boxed-in, without crossing boundaries. hooks urges everyone to get "together on the inside," but without elaboration, her sentiment becomes abstract; a vague conclusion incites people to be "All real then in that place where/ skin again is one small way to see me/ but not real enough/ to be all/ the me of me or the you of you." Like the book's title, such statements sound hopeful but remain obscure.

Ages 4-7. (Sept.)