Second Reaction: An Introduction to Immigration through the Stride of Lady Liberty


*Tracy Terris*

As I sit in my room and begin writing this review of *Her Right Foot* by Dave Eggers, I am distracted by the breaking news I hear playing in the background: President Trump signs an executive order to end his own family separation policy. For days now, my heart has been heavy as I have listened to the headlines about children being separated from their families at the border. At a time when anti-immigrant sentiment and policies are being debated, this book could not be more timely or important.

*Her Right Foot* is chock-full of historical information about the design, construction, and journey of the Statue of Liberty from France to America; more importantly, Dave Eggers has written a book that will implore the reader to consider what the Statue truly represents.

About halfway through his book, Eggers draws the reader’s attention to the heel of Lady Liberty’s right foot. If you have not had the opportunity to visit the Statue of Liberty, you might not notice that her right foot is in mid-stride. Remarkably, the 150-foot-tall statue is walking. Dave Eggers, the narrator, speaks directly to the reader and points out what many have not noticed: She is walking forward toward the harbor. This leads us to wonder, “Where is she going? What might this symbolize?”

As I read this book the first time, I found myself fascinated by the details that surround the right foot. Perhaps what I loved about this book the most is that I began to think deeply about what each part of the whole represents and the intentions of the artist, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, who designed this iconic statue.
Throughout the remainder of the book, Dave Eggers shares his own theory as to why the Statue of Liberty is in mid-stride. He beautifully explains that she is on the move to greet all immigrants and welcome them to our country. He helps the reader understand that Lady Liberty is an immigrant herself, who has been set free from the broken chains that lie next to her feet.

I was eager to read this book with a small group of second grade students. I prepared ahead of time by selecting the following vocabulary words from the text: *enlightenment, liberty, immigrant, and oppression*. I wrote child-friendly definitions for the words selected in order to build understanding and to support students’ thoughtful conversations around their immigration and the symbolism in the book. While reading, students were engaged with the text and delighted to learn the fun facts that Eggers sprinkles throughout the book. As we read through the first half of the book, students were given time to turn and talk to a partner about the new information they were learning. Once Dave Eggers began to explain the symbolism that resides in each component of Lady Liberty, I invited students to act out these parts. I thought this might help them discover for themselves what the artist intended to portray when he designed this magnificent statue. Students stood tall pretending to hold a torch, lighting the path to freedom and liberty. I was delighted when I asked the students to stand with their right leg bent and their heel off the ground and one student shouted, “She’s moving! She must be walking somewhere!” The enthusiasm in his voice was contagious and the other students agreed that it must mean something. My students listened intently as I read Dave Eggers’s interpretation of why Lady Liberty’s right foot is in mid-stride and they were eager to share their own thoughts and theories.

Following the reading I presented the following question and asked the students to have an accountable talk discussion: “What do you think the artist Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi wanted her right foot in mid-stride to represent?” Their responses were nothing short of remarkable. One student responded by saying, “The artist has her right foot in the air because he wants to send a message that you should be able to go where you want to go without anyone stopping you. If we didn’t have immigrants in this country we wouldn’t be a country at all.” Another student replied, “I agree with you because some people want to come to a new place and we should be kind and let them come here.” This is when the discussion got messy and I must admit I was nervous about my own ability to create space for multiple perspectives. Another student passionately exclaimed, “President Trump wants to build a wall around Mexico. I think that means he doesn’t want to let them in. This is rude and unfair. It goes against what the Statue of Liberty stands for.” This was rebutted by another student as he declared, “President Trump wants to protect us. That’s why he’s building the wall.” After a thoughtful and passionate discussion, my second graders concluded that we should welcome those into our country that are looking for a safe and better life. I was pleased to have witnessed such an intellectual student-led discussion of immigration provided by this small group of second graders.

This exquisitely designed book is important in that it provides a child-friendly introduction to the history of immigration in our country. Additionally, it presents the opportunity for
children to have conversations about values of America and why people may choose to come to our country for freedom and to pursue a better life. *Her Right Foot* should be read by adults, librarians, and teachers across our nation in an effort to foster empathy and compassion for those wanting to settle in a country that stands for liberty and freedom from oppression.

**About the Author**

*Tracy Terris* is an educator with the Milan Area School District in Southeast Michigan. She has taught kindergarten, first, and second grade and is currently the Early Literacy Coach at Paddock Elementary School. She is delighted to share her love and passion for literacy as she works closely with teachers and students each and every day.