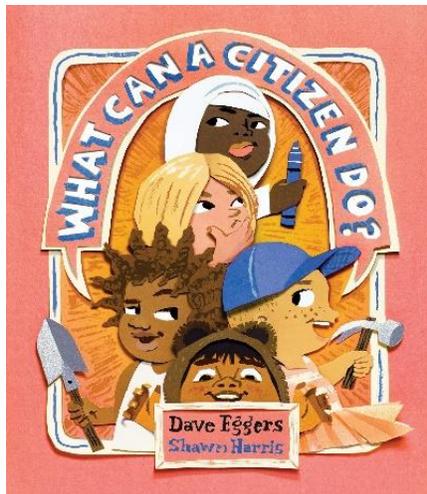# First Opinion: The Canary in the Coal Mine: A review of *What Can A Citizen Do?*

Eggers, Dave. *What Can a Citizen Do?* Illustrated by Shawn Harris. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018. Print.

Sarah Vander Zanden

A citizen cannot forget the world is more than you.

During a pandemic, with continued police violence across communities, political bullying desensitizing media outlets, and an upcoming national election fraught with tension, Dave Eggers' *What Can a Citizen Do?* is a timely resource to initiate classroom and community conversation about social responsibility. The deceptively simple text, with a few lines on each page layout, is certain to generate dialogue. For example, Eggers writes, "A citizen can be a bear" (18). Turn the page, and he confirms the question hanging in the air, "yes, a citizen can be a bear" (19). It is easy to imagine teachers and guardians reading with young children asking as a natural follow up, now what could that possibly mean? As Westheimer argues, "Schools in democratic societies must teach students how to ask challenging questions—the kinds of

questions that are, at times, uncomfortable, the kinds that question tradition" (12). Opportunities for discussion abound alongside Shawn Harris' engaging illustrations. Each page reveals complex issues connected to societal behaviors, such as inclusion and exclusion, in a highly accessible way for readers.

On first glance, the illustrations are friendly, almost cute. A closer examination of the blue and pink tones of the cut paper collage images showcase balance in composition and hue. The additional tones of brown and sepia shift the light and intensity of the illustration as variably as skin tones in society. With studied exploration, readers are introduced to many citizens who represent varied genders, races, and beliefs doing brave work. We see engaged black, brown and white folks figuring out how to disagree, change, build, and be together. Frequently in children's books about citizens, the focus is on adult community members or helpers, and this book follows that suit with a twist. The essential citizens in this text are the kids that readers see all around them; their peers. Particularly compelling, the layered images culminate in a constructed building that is much more impressive than the parts or pages that came before it. This final page illustrates in a concrete way how small or individual contributions impact the big picture.

The duality of protections for citizens paired with the responsibility those same citizens are charged with to uphold and protect society is woven through the book as well. We see examples of different citizens behaving and believing differently. Some of those examples are harmful or exclusionary and some of them are helpful, reflecting many young people's experiences as they navigate daily life. Eggers then provides many examples of doable actions such as write letters, change laws, be engaged, help one another and care. We see of the impact these actions have on the citizens in the text emotionally and physically. Mid-text, Eggers writes "A citizen's not what you are—a citizen is what you do" (24). This line is reminiscent of the canary in the coal mine sounding the alarm; it is a call to take action. Eggers urges readers not to "forget the world is more than you" (25) and naturally, educators, community members, and families reading this text together with youth will confirm…that's right, it is bigger than I am, or you are…now let's see what can we do?

Works Cited

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About the Author

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