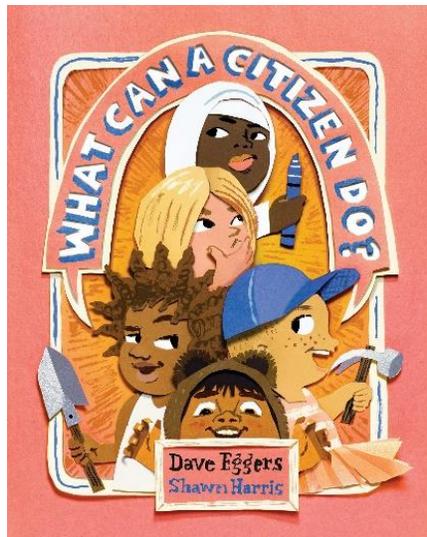


Second Reaction: Bears, Pink Pants and Trumpets: What Can A Citizen Do?

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

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Dave Eggers' picture book, *What Can a Citizen Do?* arrived in my mailbox during a tough time for students and teachers. The pandemic had upended our school community and we were now distance learning while sheltering in place. I initially felt the book was a bit young for third graders, but due to the tensions of quarantine, I appreciated its lighthearted, rhyming approach to the important theme of citizenship. I was drawn to the cut-out illustrations and the inclusion of diverse characters, including a girl wearing a hijab and a boy disrupting gender normativity with his outfit of jeans, ballcap and tutu.

Powerful citizen actions are intermingled with humorous rhymes and pictures along with the message that citizens can, and should, contribute to society. The book's list of citizen actions includes staying informed, joining causes, writing letters, reaching out to others. As a third-grade teacher who believes literacy is a tool for taking action for social justice, I was curious to see if

this simple picture book could lead us into conversations about our roles as "laddered people" living in a society filled with both "joy and pain."

The playful pictures and text fell flat with the third graders who seemed stymied by its lack of explication. On our online learning platform, students shared questions like "Why did they write this book?" and "What is the book trying to tell us?" One student commented, "This book was hard to understand." Others agreed. Did Eggers' fun introduction to citizenship miss the mark in answering the book's titular question? Or perhaps these readers, almost fourth graders at this point in the school year, felt the book had little of substance to offer.

Shawn Harris's illustrations show kids—and a bear—building a tree house over the course of the text. Eggers rhymes, "Citizens should care and care...A citizen can be a bear." I asked kids on our online discussion page to comment on why Eggers included this line. I couldn't see how animals could be citizens since they couldn't take the citizen actions listed in the book. Bears can't join causes. They can't help change laws. Most kids insisted that bears could indeed be citizens, several adding comments about animal rights.

We also talked about the book virtually, in small groups, but unlike our classroom conversations, this discussion never quite got off the ground. One student got into a giggling fit regarding the line about wearing pink pants.

Yes! A citizen can be a bear.

A citizen can be a kid.

A citizen can wear pink pants.

A citizen cannot stay hid. (Eggers unpagged)

A student brought us back on topic with, "What's up with not liking trumpets?" On a page where the text tells us, "A citizen can write a letter. A citizen can help change laws" the illustration shows a sign, "NO TRUMPETS" tacked to the tree house. Three characters, holding a trumpet, have mixed reactions to the sign. One looks sad, one angry, the third looks plaintive, with hands folded as if pleading with the sign maker to change his mind. The sign maker does reconsider and changes his sign to read "OK Trumpets." A student replied, "Yeah. Why would anyone care that much about trumpets?"

When I asked students to talk about what idea seemed most important about the book, responses included the bland, "Anyone can be a citizen" and "Citizens are helpful" and "Citizens can do a lot."

Our school year ended soon after our work with the book. Frustrated over our lackluster talks, I thought about the bears and the pink pants and the trumpets. Were these simply fun distractions or could they have something to tell us about citizenship? I spent some time reading and reflecting. Bears as citizens? I read articles by activists who offer fascinating support for why animals should be afforded rights as global citizens. Pink pants? We could have taken the opportunity to talk about how dress codes and norms fall under our first amendment right to freedom of expression. Trumpets? There are myriad examples of seemingly capricious signage that have been used to exclude people and to deny citizen rights. We also could have delved into the ways citizens use trending hashtags like #trumpforever and #nevertrump to reveal political preferences, exploring voting rights as well as citizen divisiveness during an election year.

Oh well. This was a first run, a test drive. Maybe we'll have better luck next time. I hope when I next pick up this book, our school will be back together, and in our third-grade classroom we'll get the chance to have more substantive conversations and find new answers to What Can a Citizen Do?

About the Author

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