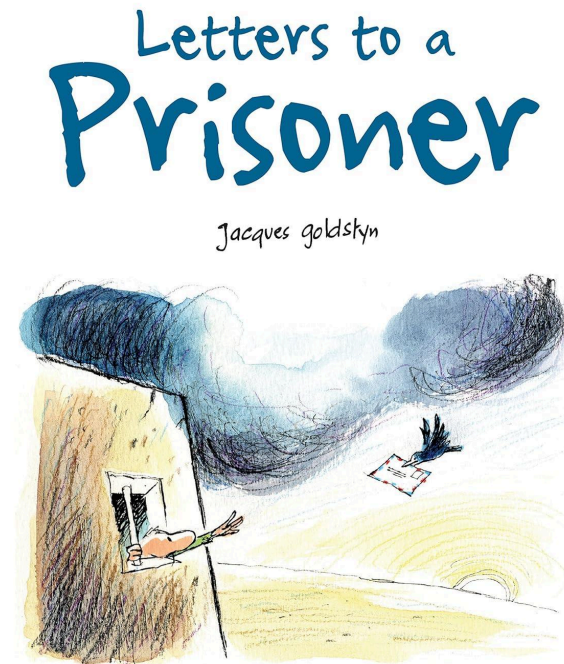


First Opinion: Letters to a Prisoner

Goldstyn, Jacques. *Letters to a Prisoner*. OwlKids Books, 2017.

Kristen Friesen



Jacques Goldstyn's "Letters to a Prisoner" won the French-language TD Canadian Children's Literature Award in 2015 and is the first of his three wordless picture books to be published in English. It is the compelling story of a father and young daughter who engage in a peaceful protest that is, unfortunately, met with violence by the authorities. The father and daughter are separated when he is arrested and jailed. However, news of his imprisonment reaches all over the world, and letters of support come flying in (literally, via pigeons and all other imaginable means of currier). Though the prison guard does his best to burn all the incoming letters of support, his efforts backfire. And while the guard is eventually buried beneath the ever-increasing piles of incoming letters, the father fashions from them a pair of wings with which he sails over the prison walls and into his daughter's arms again. The story comes full circle when, on the last

page, father and daughter are seated at a table, presumably writing letters of support to others fighting other seemingly lost causes around the world.

In his author's note, Goldstyn tells of the experience that inspired this book. Amnesty International's annual Write for Rights campaign connects in solidarity people with "one thing in common: the desire to write to a person who had been unjustly imprisoned for his or her ideas." And while the book definitely tells that story, it is also universally applicable to so many other accounts of people whose voices have been unjustly silenced.

Unfortunately, wordless picture books are often described by what they lack: words. In an effort to better place them as a literary genre, however, Honaker & Miller (2024) refer to them as visual narratives in which the illustrations communicate both plot and meaning and in which any words, while minimal, are strategically placed.

As a visual narrative, Goldstyn's story is powerful. Though his illustrations are simplistic and cartoonish, his message is anything but. Particularly universal is his presentation of colors, symbolism and shapes to portray the message of the protesters up against that of the authorities. The protestors, appearing as individuals of all ages, carry signs depicting red circles. In this way, the message could be anything. While the color red communicates urgency and strength, it is nonetheless presented peacefully in the expressions of the protestors (including the daughter, whose "sign" is a red balloon). The authorities, however, are depicted as indistinguishable blue shadowy figures. Their uniformity signals that they've forfeited their individual rights in order to protect the status quo. And their message, equally universal in its depiction as blue squares, falls just as cold and heavy across the pages. It is no surprise, then, that the protestors are beaten, trampled underfoot and/or hauled off.

In children's literature, trauma manifests as psychological – a "piercing" or "breach of border" after which "the character's pain dominates the narrative" (Kokkola, 2021). Perhaps most traumatic among Goldstyn's illustrations is that of the daughter's balloon popping at the end of one shadowy figure's long rifle. While we might be tempted to exhale with relief that the rifle wasn't used to shoot a body, Goldstyn's metaphor is not lost. Nor is it his only visual metaphor.

Following the violence, Goldstyn helps us imagine the frustration, loneliness, and grief experienced by the imprisoned father as his thoughts turn from red dots to the illustrated memories of his daughter. And when he's nearly lost all hope, the letters start pouring in. It isn't until the guard attempts to burn them all that we see fragments of the letters – words of comfort and support written in many languages and, notably, the only words Goldstyn features in this book – light into the sky. Collectively, the smoke and ash from a giant burnpile of letters transforms into a black S.O.S. that circles the globe.

The S.O.S. is seen by supporters all over the world, and Goldstyn creatively communicates their diversity in mini vignettes. A touch of whimsy with a clown sitting to write a letter while seated on his soap box is balanced by an illustration of a man using a feathered quill to write his important message on a scroll. And Goldstyn's depiction of diversity spans race, gender, age, and ability, juxtaposing an illustration of a female astronaut writing her letter from outer space and a woman without arms writing her letter by clenching a pen between her teeth. And, of course, all of these letters make their way in equally creative ways to essentially free the prisoner. It's fair to say that all heaven and earth conspire to support the marginalized in Goldstyn's painfully honest yet persistently optimistic narrative.

Indeed, such a graphic story is at home in a graphic format. But in this wordless book, Goldstyn challenges notions that picture books are only for young children. The complexity of this and many other wordless picture books requires that students use critical thinking to decode meaning, a process that can take significant time and multiple attempts. Moreover, such a format is inclusive of emerging bilinguals whose grasp on English may be limited, but whose grasp on marginalization may be much more advanced than their classmates. (Honaker & Miller, 2024) And while children of all ages can benefit from a story about using their voices to affect change, this book contains potentially traumatic depictions of authority figures wielding guns and imparting violence on unarmed citizens. In other words, children who are too young to watch the evening news would be too young to reap the benefits of this book.

In the middle and high school classroom, however, the extent to which Goldstyn's book could be powerfully used would seem, at first glance, to be endless. Creative teachers of all manners of social studies and language arts could easily relate this text to historical and current events. Its

wordless nature leaves space for student interpretation and multimodal learning. And perhaps most importantly, its inspirational nature could encourage student voice in written, spoken and even artistic response. And that's exactly what Goldstyn would want. Ironically, this book, absent words, is the very thing to prompt a passionate word from all who "read" it.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Kristen Friesen is a former career high school English teacher and current Ph.D. student in the Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education program at University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Her focus is on empowering multicultural and multilingual students in the context of the secondary English Language Arts classroom, and to that end, the use of picture books is a favorite strategy. Additionally, Kristen teaches undergraduate students, helps facilitate department research, and supervises pre-service teachers.