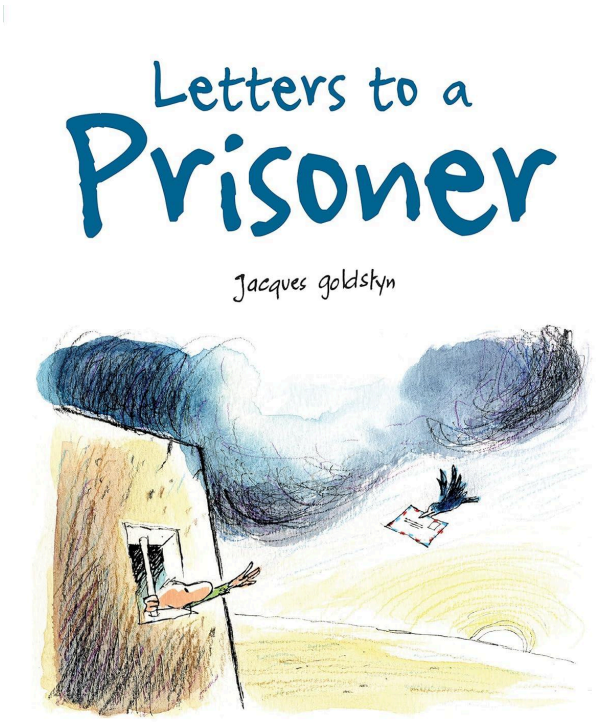
Second Reaction: Letters to a Prisoner

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

Polly Parkinson



Letters to a Prisoner by Jacques Goldstyn, first published in France in 2015, is a picture book without words that tells the story of a peaceful protestor who is imprisoned. Depending on the audience, you may choose to read the description inside the front flap, or let the pictures stand alone. You might let children study each page quietly, or ask them what they see. I always read the dedication page, and this one is to a family who were separated for ten years when one parent was imprisoned for insulting the national religion. Above the dedication is a large red

balloon, which reappears again on the first page of the story. Adults may be reminded of the French movie Le Ballon Rouge (Lamorisse, 1956) that pays homage to childhood innocence, but I like to ask the children what it makes them think of. In the picture book, people gather around an imposing building marked with a large blue-black square and flanked by people in riot gear all similarly marked. Without words, there is an immediate visual contrast between the shapes and colors. I ask children what feeling they get from each group and what might be happening (always emphasizing there is not one correct answer).

As the father is thrown in a police van and the child's balloon is shot to bits, the red circles carry the reader's eye through the story. With a minimum of detail and sometimes multiple scenes per page, the illustrations show red circles diminishing in size. You might ask children about this change. What feelings do they get when the scene is all neutral tones? What do they notice about the shapes? I find children enjoy looking for the animals throughout. The prisoner draws on the wall a charcoal picture of himself with the child again. Why do the next few pages change to colored scenes? Does anyone notice the circle shape reappearing--smaller, in muted red, as apples? When the parent and child walk past a picket fence that morphs into the tally marks on the wall, back in the cell, what do the children think has happened?

Clever visual techniques move the story, but the crescendo begins when a bird and mouse start delivering letters to the prisoner—so many the guard can't shred, confiscate, or burn them all, or stop the scraps from spreading around the world. How do your child readers feel now? What do they think will happen next? What do they notice about the colorful vignettes of people around the globe, often with an animal friend? Discuss where the letters might be going. Eventually, the prisoner is shown on a tsunami of letters, and sprouting letter wings, soaring out of the cell and home to the child. Does anyone notice the red circle returns as the sun in the final

scene when everything else fades to neutral tones with the parent and child seen companionably writing letters with their cat? Most children I know love to talk about what is real and what is imagined, so I share that the Amnesty International website reports that over a million messages were sent in support of Raif Badawi (in the dedication). The author Goldstyn's afterword describes his participation in the organization's letter-writing marathons, which inspired this story. The picture book was published three years after Badawi was incarcerated, and a happy development since then is that he was released in 2022.

Quite remarkably, this book manages to tell a complex and terrifying story in a way that is suitable even for very young children. It shows that people can be persecuted for their ideas, cruelty exists, and families sometimes suffer from being separated. Perhaps it is precisely because there are no words that the story cannot be much scarier than what a child already knows. For that reason, I avoid too much of my own commentary. In a similar way, the book is comfortable for nonbinary children and queer families because there are not words defining people in terms of gender or sexuality (the cover flap does say father and daughter). It is a single-parent family (gender-fluid green tunic and loose pants on the parent) and the child's hair and clothing are fairly neutral (light tan skin, light brown hair in a short spiky ponytail, striped shirt, khaki shorts/skirt). The riot police are only seen as the color of their clothing with no indicators of race or ethnicity, and the prison guard is all khaki but intimidating in size and actions. A variety of ages, ethnicities and languages are depicted (although the two main characters present mostly as white) with no observable indicators of religion or dis/ability. The tone of the book is friendly and the illustrations maintain a whimsical feel despite the serious content. The fantastical image of the prisoner flying free after ordinary people join their efforts, is what carries the story. Children are most likely left feeling that they live in a caring world and

their efforts can also make a difference, but your children get to tell you what they think--and that is the magic of stories.

About the Author

Polly Parkinson is a third-year doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies at Utah State University, where she also earned her library endorsement. She has a DEI certificate from University of South Florida; an Information, Technology, and Scientific Literacy certificate from Emporia State's School of Library and Information Management; an MA from Skidmore College; and 17 years of experience as a teacher and librarian. Her research centers on aesthetic texts, personhood, and community justice issues. She enjoys board games, museums, exploring nature, and talking books with people of all ages.