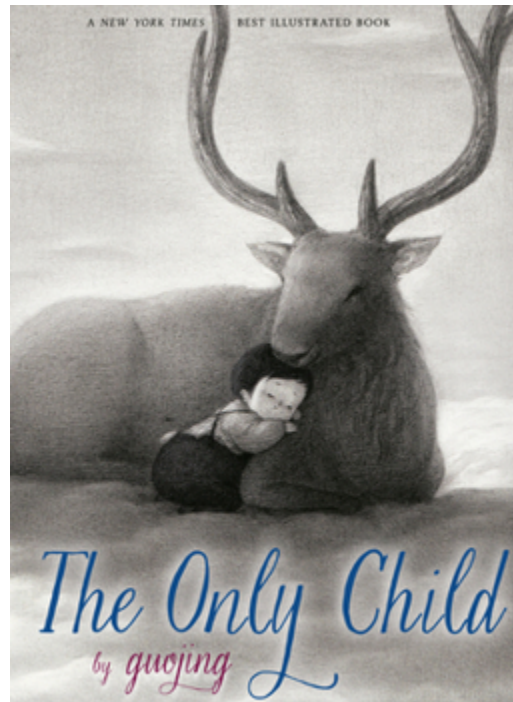


Second Reaction: The Only Child

Guojing. *The only child*. Random House Studio, 2015.

Rebecca L. Knapp



The Only Child by Guojing is a magical story that took me on an adventure back to childhood. *The Only Child* is a completely wordless book, and the only words are the title and author's note, where she explains the basis for the story. Guojing grew up in China under the one-child policy in the 1980s and had a very lonely childhood. Because both parents worked, she spent many days at her grandmother's house or home alone longing for friendship and adventure, which inspired this graphic novel.

The story begins with a young girl playing alone until she looks at a photo of her grandmother, which inspires her to go for a visit. She leaves a note for her parents and begins her adventure. She falls asleep on the bus only to wake with a start, alone and afraid. As she wanders into the woods, she meets a stag who takes her on a magical adventure up a cloud-studded staircase into the sky where they embark on a fantastical adventure. When the girl realizes just

how far she is from home, the stag comforts her and takes the girl home to a joyful reunion with her parents and a tear-filled goodbye to her new friend. As the story ends, we see the little girl as she falls asleep clutching a small toy stag, leaving the reader wondering if the adventure was real, a figment of the girl's imagination, or a dream.

From an educator's perspective, this book can be used with multiple grade levels. Because it is completely wordless, students who have not yet begun to read can engage with the story through the illustrations. For young students, I would use *The Only Child* to teach details, sequencing, and emotional literacy. This book is also excellent for sparking open-ended discussion about friendship, loneliness, and family. This book can also be used with older students to consider theme, voice, and other aspects of comprehension. Because many students are accustomed to reading words and not pictures, this book will require an introduction and teacher modeling of reading pictures, noticing details, and making inferences.

As a special education teacher, I often encourage my students to 'read' the pictures in storybooks anyway, making this type of graphic novel ideal for my students, even students with multiple needs. Many of my students depend on visuals for communication and learning, so this type of book provides them with an accessible, engaging story through a mode they are familiar with despite their ability to read written words.

This book is also an excellent resource for teaching emotional literacy. Because the illustrations portray so much emotion, students can explore how characters feel and why they feel that way. Emotions of wonder, loneliness, boredom, panic, and surprise, to name a few, are all shown beautifully in this book. Although young students may not yet have the vocabulary to discuss these feelings, books like *The Only Child* are ideal starting points for these discussions and lessons in emotional literacy.

As a reader, this book drew me in through the beautiful illustrations. Although the illustrations are all black and white, they were alive with imagination despite their lack of color. My favorite part is when the friends emerged from the darkness after being swallowed by the whale into what appears to be a sky full of stars. As I turned the page, I felt myself lifted into the sky with the characters, and the joy and wonder on the little girl's face reflected my feelings as I read this part of the story. This story also reflects the longing for connection I see in many of my students. Because so many students at my school come from low-income families, both parents work long hours, and students spend much time either with older siblings or grandparents. The

girl's experience in this book is reflective of this; although not an exact mirror, I think students at my school would be able to see themselves in this story.

Overall, I recommend this book not only because of its application to teaching, but also to read for leisure. *The Only Child* tells an engaging story of friendship in an unlikely place, the importance of family, and the beauty of imagination.

About the Author

Rebecca Knapp is a special education teacher working with students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade on the North Carolina Extended Content Standards. She loves reading with her students and exploring new types of accessible texts for all learners and using art with her students to respond to books. Rebecca is also a current doctoral student pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership.