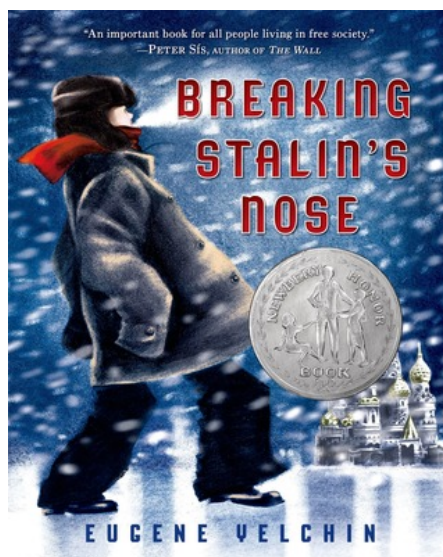




Breaking Stalin's Nose

Eugene Velchin

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Eugene Yelchin

Breaking Stalin's Nose Eugene Yelchin
One of *Horn Book's* Best Fiction Books of 2011

Sasha Zaichik has known the laws of the Soviet Young Pioneers since the age of six:

The Young Pioneer is devoted to Comrade Stalin, the Communist Party, and Communism.

A Young Pioneer is a reliable comrade and always acts according to conscience.

A Young Pioneer has a right to criticize shortcomings.

But now that it is finally time to join the Young Pioneers, the day Sasha has awaited for so long, everything seems to go awry. He breaks a classmate's glasses with a snowball. He accidentally damages a bust of Stalin in the school hallway. And worst of all, his father, the best Communist he knows, was arrested just last night.

This moving story of a ten-year-old boy's world shattering is masterful in its simplicity, powerful in its message, and heartbreaking in its plausibility.

Breaking Stalin's Nose Details

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Author : Eugene Yelchin

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From Reader Review Breaking Stalin's Nose for online ebook

Inhabiting Books says

This book flew invisibly past my radar. I hadn't heard of it or even seen it until I read that it won the Newbery Honor. Obviously, I had to rectify that, so when my latest batch of books came from the library yesterday, full of this year's award winners, I wanted to read this one first.

Synopsis: Ten-year-old Sasha is a fervently loyal Stalinist, who is excited to become a part of the Young Pioneers (Stalin's youth organization) and extremely proud of his father, who works for the State Security (secret police). They live with 46 other people in a communal flat/apartment, happy -from Sasha's perspective- that they are the living epitome of Stalin's ideals. Then, in the middle of the night, the secret police come and roughly haul away his father. What follows is a quick succession of events that has Sasha questioning his loyalty and the validity of the system.

The action of this fairly quick and completely gripping story takes place over the course of only one evening and the following day. It's a book that contains important issues such as freedom (or the lack of it), paranoia, propaganda, idealism vs. reality, standing for right (or not).

Here are some thoughts I had as I read:

-I think Yelchin does a very admirable job of tackling his subject from a naive ten-year-old's perspective. It's a genius approach, reminiscent of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, where the limits of the young protagonist's understanding and maturity throws a spotlight on the horrors going on around them. What Yelchin seems to steer away from are Sasha's emotions. Deliberate device or not, I think it's genius to downplay them, because again, it throws the spotlight onto the world in which he lives. The buildup of paranoia and hysteria that exists in the book -created by living in such a system- engulfs the reader in their own emotions. I think it would be completely overwhelming if we had to deal with both sets of emotions at once, especially for the targeted reading age group.

-In the beginning, Sasha is the perfect little Communist, just as he's been trained from baby-hood. Even as people are betraying his family, he doesn't feel a sense of betrayal, rather he admires their patriotism. There are also a few instances where Sasha has to choose to take a stand for right, and you can't help having empathy for his choices. (You will have to read the book to understand this in context.) I think it's a credit to Yelchin's writing ability that he can make us empathize with a boy with whom we have ostensibly very little in common.

-It's interesting to me how the author subtly shows the disconnect between child and adult. Here is Sasha's father, who has trained him to be a good little Communist from birth, and yet somehow expects him to know where the inconsistencies lie between the dogma and reality. It's a mistake we parents frequently make: assuming that our young children can see and understand those subtleties and inconsistencies.

-Yelchin, through young Sasha, gets to the heart of why this period of Russian history is known as The Great Terror: what happens to society as a whole and the individuals within it when every infraction is treated like it's the very worst possible crime? What happens when people are kept in such a state of terror and propaganda that they don't even realize they are the victims?

-The illustrations are dark, and have an exaggerated quality that perfectly accompanies the exaggerated paranoia. (There's an ironic one on pages 106-107 depicting the principal as Hitler.) The illustrations are reminiscent of Communist propaganda posters from the era. The other interesting thing to note is that we only see Sasha from the back or side -always turned away from the viewer- throughout the book, until we finally see his face for the first time on p. 137, just before the end.

-This book would make an excellent accompaniment to history lessons about that era for children age 10 and up. I'd have high schoolers read it as part of a Russian history unit. I think it would also make excellent book

club reading.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

This book reminded me of Morris Gleitzman's *Once*, in that both main characters are boys who are very naive about the political situations in their countries. In Gleitzman's book it's the Nazis in WWII Poland; in Yelchin's book it's Stalin's Russia. Young Sasha considers himself a loyal supporter of Stalin and a good Communist like his father. On the eve of being inducted into the Young Pioneers, everything changes when his father is arrested. Suddenly he is alone, forced to look at everything around him with different eyes. It's a vivid portrayal of how a political system that so easily indoctrinates its young can just as quickly disillusion them. I've read a few YA novels about life in Russia at this time, but this one was the most vivid, the one that had the greatest emotional impact on me, I think because the protagonist is so young. The author states that the story is based on the experiences of his father, who survived Stalin's regime. This is the kind of book that brings the dry facts of history alive. Highly recommended!

Beth says

This fast-paced story follows 10-year-old Sasha Zaichik during a pivotal two day period of his life. The book opens with Sasha writing a letter to his beloved Comrade Stalin, expressing his joy at his upcoming acceptance into the ranks of the Soviet Young Pioneers. But after his father is arrested, Sasha's eyes are gradually opened to the fact that things aren't right in his world.

The first person narrative allows us to share in Sasha's experiences: the optimism and hope he finds in Communism, his complete and utter trust in his great Leader and Teacher Stalin, his confusion at how Stalin could allow his father to be arrested, the pressure he faces at school to inform on his friends and family members, his realization that the system he has always known and loved may suddenly turn on him. It's a fascinating account, written by a man who grew up in the Soviet Union himself, and is coupled with gripping black-and-white illustrations throughout.

This book is intended for children, and it doesn't overstep those bounds. It deals with a difficult topic in a very accessible way. I would suggest this book for late elementary and middle schoolers, especially in a discussion-oriented environment with parents or teachers. It wasn't as disturbing as other children's books I've read on the topic, such as *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*.

An excerpt from the Author's Note sums up the book's message well: "To this day, there are places in the world where innocent people face persecution and death for making a choice about what they believe to be right."

If you appreciated this review, check out my blog at pagesandmargins.wordpress.com

Kathleen Duffy says

Great look into the totalitarianism under Stalin. This topic isn't focused on as much as it should.

Steph says

Everything fits together to create a masterpiece. A heart wrenching narrative, tragic actual historical events, and haunting illustrations makes this one of the top middle grade books I have ever read. I am curious to how an innocent child reader's mind would view the grim tale. A valuable read for all ages!

Edward Sullivan says

Great story about a young boy's disillusionment with Stalin's violently oppressive regime in the Soviet Union. The age group this book is written for will need historical context to fully appreciate the story but it is well-suited for reading aloud and group discussion. In an afterward, the author discusses his own experience growing up in the Soviet Union.

Lesley says

A young boy that believes the lies of Stalin. Sad that this was the life of so many people!

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

More than anything, Sasha Zaichik, 10, wants to become a Young Pioneer in Stalin's Soviet Union and a good Communist like his dad. Comrade Zaichik, who works for the State Security or secret police capturing enemies of the state, is a true Communist hero, even receiving a medal personally pinned on by Stalin himself.

However, when Comrade Zaichik is arrested by people from State Security in the middle the night before Sasha's Young Pioneer ceremony, he suddenly finds himself homeless, an orphan of the state slated to be sent to an orphanage the next morning.

Certain his father's arrest is a mistake, Sasha decides to go to the Kremlin and personally speak to Stalin about it. After all, he reasons, since Comrade Stalin's light is always on, he is probably up working, anyway. But as soon as the guards see him, he is forced to run away. Not only that, he gets turned away by his aunt's husband when he goes to her for help. Sasha finally ends up sleeping in the basement of his aunt's building, under some warm pipes.

He decides to go to school the next day, in the hope that his father's arrest will have already been recognized as a mistake and he will be at the ceremony as promised to tie Young Pioneers red scarf around the necks of Sasha and his classmates. But his day is filled with moral choices and the events that follow in school turn out to be a microcosm of the wider Soviet world, a world in which people turn each other in to the authorities, where good and bad communists are separated from each other and confessions are forced out of everyone including school children using questionable methods.

As you might expect, by the end of the 24 hours in which Sasha's nightmare takes place, his life has been changed forever. But what is to become of young Sasha?

There aren't many stories that take place in Stalin's violent, oppressive Soviet Union, and using a young, idealistic boy to reveal what it was really like makes this a much more accessible story than had Sasha already become another suspicious opportunist using the state to get what he wants.

Yelchin sets Sasha's story in the icy cold Soviet winter, a setting that is a perfect reflection of the attitudes and policies of the characters. Warm friendships just didn't happen in this atmosphere, instead there was a pervasive atmosphere of fear and mistrust, but also a little honor among 'outsiders' that was refreshing.

Even as his world comes completely apart, as he learns truths that would be difficult for any child to handle, such as what really happened to his American mother, what really went on in the prison his father was taken to, Sasha retains a hopeful, innocent voice with a blind faith that right will win out. In many ways, Sasha reminded me of Felix from Morris Gleitzman's Holocaust books *Once*, *Then*, and *After* (books I highly recommend if you haven't already done so).

Simple spot black, white and gray graphite illustrations done by the author are used throughout *Breaking Stalin's Nose*, which aptly reflect to colorlessness of the story's setting.

I can't believe it took me so long to read this book, but now that I have I can see why it is a 2012 Newbery Honor Book.

Be sure to read the Author's Note and accompanying information about the Sasha's Moscow found at the back of the book.

This book is recommended for readers age 9+

This book is part of my personal library

This review was originally posted at *Breaking Stalin's Nose*

Steph says

Zaichik loses his father under a system propped up by fear, self-preservation, and oppression. His father is arrested, and he hears enough rumor to begin to suspect that his father "turned in" his mother. The father is then ultimately arrested for betraying the state. The aunt rejects the nephew out of fear that contact with Zaichik will lead to her own arrest. In essence, Zaichik becomes homeless.

Not a "feel good" novel, but certainly a quick read.

The book is appropriate for 4-8th grade.

The book has really wonderful illustrations.

The book can be read in one sitting - about 150 pages.

Elizabeth says

So well done. I was even more impressed when I read the author's note at the end of the book and learned that the story of a loyal Communist boy who realizes that the government he has idealized isn't as awesome as he thought is mostly autobiographical. It's a short book with really interesting illustrations (also done by

the author) and it is such a good picture of a child's view of Communism. I loved that as an adult I could both sympathize with the child and see what he couldn't see about his life.

Terri says

Yelchin's debut novel examines life in Stalinist Russia through the eyes of Sasha, a young boy who idolizes Stalin. He believes the lies and half truths he has been told and rationalizes anomalies that don't fit his vision of Stalin's glorious leadership until the night before he is to join the Young Pioneers, the night his father is betrayed and arrested, the night he begins to see the painful truth about his father, his friends, and his idol. The explicit theme is shared by a substitute teacher in a Russian Literature class: "What 'The Nose' so vividly demonstrates to us today," says Luzhko, "is that when we blindly believe in someone else's idea of what is right or wrong for us as individuals, sooner or later our refusal to make our own choices could lead to the collapse of the entire political system. An entire country. The world, even."

He looks at the class significantly and says, 'Do you understand?'

Of course, they have no idea what he's talking about. This Luzhko is suspicious. I always thought so. All teachers use words you hear on the radio, but he doesn't. I don't know what's wrong with him. I turn and walk away."

Yelchin's illustration of Sasha's principal resembles Adolph Hitler. I don't think that's a coincidence. Our world continues to be deeply divided and far too many people accept ideas and doctrine at face value. Perhaps *Breaking Stalin's Nose* should be required reading for us all, a clarion call to think for one's self rather than blindly "drinking the Kool-Aid" of any cause.

Claire says

[He in fact snubs it by ruining the incredible monument of Stalin in front of all the teachers and everybody. (hide spoiler)]

Larnacouer de SH says

?nan?lmazd?.

Bask?c? bir toplumda haliyle bast?r?lm?? duygular içinde bo?u?an bir çocu?un dünyas?n? okuyoruz *Stalin'in Burnunu K?rmak* kitab?nda. Gerçekten 100 sayfa içine tüm dönem s??d?r?lm??, kelimeler yüre?inize i?leyecek kadar özenle yaz?lm??. ?llüstrasyonlar kendine hayran b?rakt?racak kadar özel ve güzeller.

Yaln?z **Newbery Onur Ödülü ve Y?l?n En ?yi Çocuk Kitab?** ünvan?n? alan kitaplar aras?ndaym?? *Stalin'in Burnunu K?rmak*, iyiki kitaba küçükken denk gelmemi?im.

Öyle ya bu e?ek kadar halimle zaman zaman yutkunamad?m okurken, hüznü ve çaresizlik içine batt?m; ne çocu?u ayol?! Delirdiniz mi siz?

Zaten yazar Eugene Yelchin, Genç Sovyet Öncüsü olmak istediği zamanlar? Sasha Zaichik aracılığıyla bir aktarmı bize.

Kitabın duygulara nokta atması yaptığı bir gerçek.

Bunun nedeni hikayenin bir çocuğun gözünden anlatması ve illüstrasyonlar ile desteklenmesi olması.

Meğer çok daha fazlasıymış. Nur topu gibi bir 5 puan benden.

Geçmez artık bu ba? a?r?s?. Mutlu musunuz?

Marsha says

My daughter, an elementary media specialist, read this book before me and in her review she wondered how the students would react to this book as it depicts a piece of history about which they will probably know little to nothing. I do agree with her. The cover is enticing, but I don't know that elementary students will get the book at all. However, I think this is a curriculum connection for teachers and a really good read aloud. Discussion to enlighten students about the history of the story and then making the correlation to places in the world where government tyranny is still prevalent lifts this book above a three star.

I have been toying with the idea of sharing it with our high school world history teacher. She is a reader and just might see possibilities for students older than the reading population for which this book aims.

DaNae says

I try not to question "the committee's" choices but this book flew across the room when I finished. It reads like a short story which should be featured on NPR's selected shorts. NOT and early chapter book.

Really, Schmidt and Ness didn't make the cut, but this got through?

Danielle says

Sasha has spent his whole life waiting for the day he can become a Young Pioneer. As a good Communist, he wants to follow in his father's footsteps; joining the Young Pioneers is the first step. Yet, the night before his ceremony, Sasha's father, the best Communist he knows, is arrested. At school, his day gets worse, as he breaks the nose off of a bust of Stalin. Over these two days in Sasha's life, we as readers experience not only the prejudicial and paranoid actions of "good Communists" but also the questioning of everything Sasha knows to be true. This book provides a realistic view of what life was like in Soviet Russia, where being accused of being "not Communist" was enough to sentence someone to death with little to no evidence.

Yelchin left Soviet Russia for the United States because of the type of oppression and paranoia that he writes of in this book. His writing style is very fast-paced: events proceed quickly as if watching an action movie. Though Sasha's life is reeling around him, we get very little of his feelings. It seems that Sasha goes through the motions; as I was reading, I felt that a sense of naivete and confusion. Since the historical background of Soviet Russia may be unfamiliar to students, it would be necessary to provide scaffolds to help students understand this context. Thus, including nonfiction works about Russia and Communism, biographies, and other primary sources would build student understanding of Sasha's experiences. Though students may not have a lot of knowledge around the world in which Sasha lives, themes introduced in the book have

relevance today and could be related to discussion of civil rights. This book would be ideal for older elementary school students, as they would be able to understand the complicated themes addressed.

babyhippoface says

Sasha wants nothing more than to be a member of the Young Soviet Pioneers. Sasha's father works for Stalin's State Security--secret police--and Sasha wants to be just like him. Stalin himself pinned the order of the Red Banner on his Sasha's father's chest and called him "an iron broom purging the vermin from our midst." If only Sasha understood exactly what that statement meant, and who was counted as "vermin".

Sasha's is the voice of innocent, blind loyalty. Throughout the book he makes statements that reveal his belief in the benevolence of Communism in the face of blatant contradiction. People aren't afraid of his father, they are "*respectful*". That boy, Four Eyes, who didn't do anything wrong, is being dragged away by the Secret Police, but that's okay because, "*he'll get to see his parents*" (who have been imprisoned as "enemies of the people"). After his father took his mother to the hospital, where she died, Sasha's Aunt Larisa said his father looked "guilty, not sad", and Sasha thinks there must have been a funeral and wonders why his father didn't take him. *Probably because "he blamed himself for not being able to save my mom. He's not even a doctor, but he's that responsible."*

In only two short days Sasha's world is turned upside-down. He learns more about Stalin's tyrannical regime than he wants to know. By the end of this brief novel, he is still denying much of the truth, but he has a new and painful understanding of what it means to be a Communist.

Breaking Stalin's Nose is brief, but powerful. It's written in a way children can understand. Will they comprehend the magnitude of Communism? Absolutely not. I don't even think I can comprehend that. But it's a start.

Here's the problem, though: I think this book's shelf appeal to children is virtually non-existent. I can't think of a single child who would read the jacket flap and want to read this. They have no idea who Stalin was or what a Communist is. As far as I know, they don't learn about it in school, either. I didn't.

However, the truth of this message is an invaluable one for us, for our children, and for their children. There will be some courageous educators who will be inspired to work this book into their curriculum. Historical background instruction is a prerequisite, but the potential for intense classroom discussion is immeasurable.

Outside of the classroom, *in the home*, is where this book can have the most power, though. **Parents, get this book and read it with your children.** Talk to them about Sasha's life. Tell them what you know about Communism, and if you feel you don't know enough, learn about it together. Our children must know this saga in history so they will not allow it to be repeated.

Lisa says

I thought this was amazing. I could really feel the place, it was eerie. The illustrations matched the mood entirely. This was a very thoughtful work. The story was NOT run-of-the-mill. Very original and fast-paced. This book is sophisticated enough for adults, and simple enough for children (who are ready for this subject matter). I was really blown away by this. I highly recommend it for pretty much anyone.

Sevgi Ülker says

"Keramet bakan gözde de?il, gören gözde" sözünün kan?tlanm?? hali gibi bir kitap.

Bir çocu?un gözünden o dönemi okumak, ya?ad?klar?n? hissetmek, her bir cümlesinin alt?ndaki anlam? görmek oldukça etkileyiciydi.

Berfin Kanat says

Stalin döneminde ya?ananlar? bir çocu?un gözlerinden anlatan k?sa ve çok çarp?c? bir kitap. Ve bu bir çocuk kitab?, yeti?kinler için yaz?lsa ortaya nas?l bir ?ey ç?karm?? dü?ünmek istemiyorum. Kitab?n sonunda yazarla yap?lan bir röportaj var, yazma sürecinde duygusal olarak çok zorland???n? belirtiyor. Okurken ben de zorland?m, çünkü hepsi gerçek, hepsi ve daha kötöleri ya?and?. Birkaç gün önce The Death of Stalin'i izledim, o i?in kara mizahla harmanlanm?? taraf?yd?. Bu kitap ise o dönemde ya?anan korkunç olaylar? çocuklu?un saf dü?ünceleriyle aktar?yor.

En sevdi?im çocuk kitaplar?na bir yenisi daha eklendi. Yazar ayn? zamanda kitab?n illüstrasyonlar?n? da yapm??, Sasha'n?n sade ya?am? ve hikayenin karamsarl???yla uyumlu çizimler. ?yi ki okudum, öneren ki?iye bin te?ekkür.
