

The Harmonica

By Tony Johnston
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Reviewed by
Mary Johns

A book titled, *The Harmonica*, would seem to scream for use in a music classroom. Tony Johnston's book fulfills that expectation.

It is based on a true story from the life of Henryk Rosmaryn, who survived life in a concentration camp during World War II. The main character in the book is a poor Jewish boy in Poland whose family's only musical experiences were their own off-key singing voices and the melodies of Schubert, played on their neighbor's gramophone. Still, the boy dreamed of music. One day his wish was granted when his father gave him a shiny new harmonica. He learned to play the melodies of Schubert and filled their home with music, dancing, and happiness.

That happiness came to an abrupt end when the family was split apart and taken to concentration camps. When the boy faced seemingly hopeless despair in the concentration camp, he endured by playing Schubert on his harmonica. His music also meant survival. He fearfully played his harmonica each night for a commandant who threw him bread after he performed. Although he felt guilty for receiving this extra bread when others were starving, the prisoners who heard his music found hope, reassurance, and solace and were touched by its beauty.

The words of the book read like poetry: "I cannot remember my father's face, or my mother's, but I remember their love, warm and enfolding as a song." The lyrical language is complemented by poignant mixed media illustrations by Ron Mazellan. The family scenes at the beginning of the book are bathed in warm orange

and brown tones. As the Nazi soldiers appear, the illustrations take on a dark cast with shadows of gray, purple, and black. The colors remain bleak and dreary until the last page when, as the boy plays his harmonica with all his heart, the warm colors return—a symbol of hope.

The subject matter of this book makes it more appropriate for upper-elementary or middle-school students, which is one of the reasons I liked the book. It is sometimes hard to find meaningful picture books for older students that deal with the emotional power of music. The story begs for critical thinking and discussion about the emotional effects of music: Can music become a reason for existence? Why was the music the boy played on his harmonica important to the other

prisoners? Can truly evil people, like the commandant, still be moved by music? Is this book relevant today? How does the music in your life compare with the music in the story?

It is also sometimes hard to find books for older students that can be read aloud to a class in a very short time. This book is both short and easy to read, and it has pictures large enough to see from a distance. Even within the confines of a short music period and a demanding curriculum, one could easily find the time and justification for including this book in a lesson plan.

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