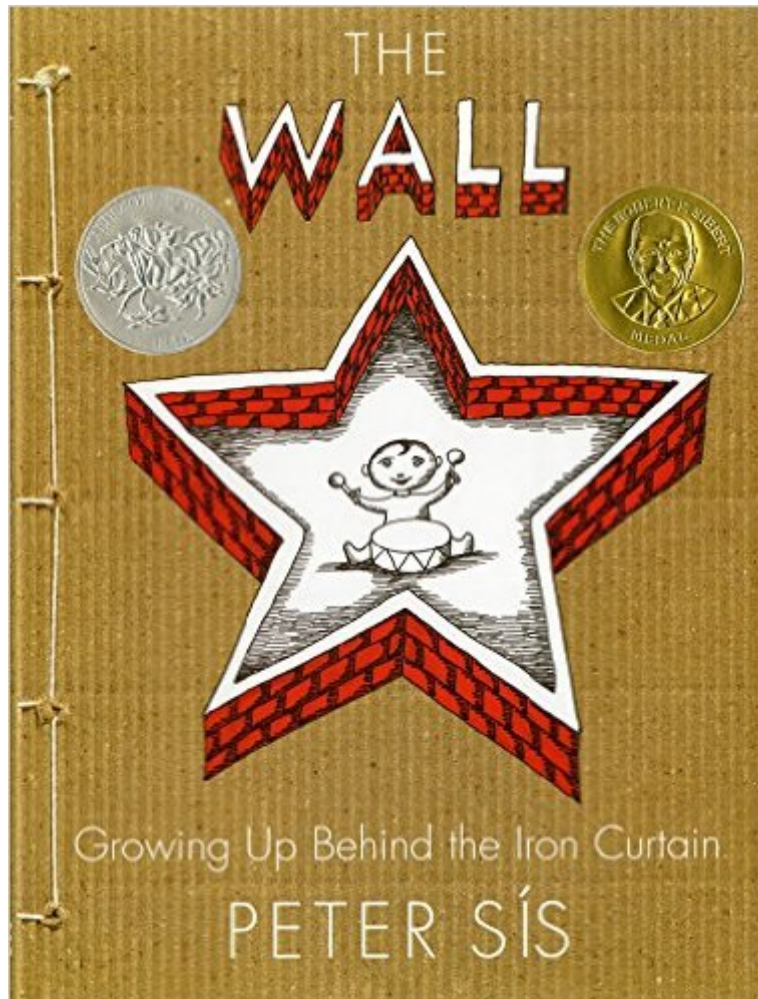


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The Wall: Growing Up Behind The Iron Curtain (Caldecott Honor Book)



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER "I was born at the beginning of it all, on the Red sideâ€•the Communist sideâ€•of the Iron Curtain." Through annotated illustrations, journals, maps, and dreamscapes, Peter SÃ- s shows what life was like for a child who loved to draw, proudly wore the red scarf of a Young Pioneer, stood guard at the giant statue of Stalin, and believed whatever he was told to believe. But adolescence brought questions. Cracks began to appear in the Iron Curtain, and news from the West slowly filtered into the country. SÃ- s learned about beat poetry, rock 'n' roll, blue jeans, and Coca-Cola. He let his hair grow long, secretly read banned books, and joined a rock band. Then came the Prague Spring of 1968, and for a teenager who wanted to see the world and meet the Beatles, this was a magical time. It was short-lived, however, brought to a sudden and brutal end by the Soviet-led invasion. But this brief flowering had provided a glimpse of new possibilitiesâ€•creativity could be discouraged but not easily killed. By joining memory and history, SÃ- s takes us on his extraordinary journey: from infant with paintbrush in hand to young man borne aloft by the wings of his art. This title has Common Core connections. The Wall is a 2007 New York Times Book Review Best Illustrated Book of the Year, a 2008 Caldecott Honor Book, a 2008 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year, the winner of the 2008 Boston Globe - Horn Book Award for Nonfiction, and a nominee for the 2008 Eisner Award for Best Publication for Kids.

Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Customer Reviews

Not only for the children: Everybody is familiar with the saying "we take certain things, like freedom for granted". Peter Sis' book is about living in a country where this self-evident asset did not exist. Bear in mind, the author does not write about some high ideas whose proclamations would endanger the state. He is talking about criticizing government actions within a scope of a neighborly gossip - one cannot complain about the shortages of particular goods, telephones are bugged, certain books and films are banned, press, art and whole culture are censored, foreign radios are jammed, letters are opened and censored, informers are rewarded for snooping etc. "Yes", some readers might say "we already read about it so many times, and the cold war ended seventeen years ago". Of course, books were written about it and some adults even read it, but what is new about this book is its target. It is aimed for the children. The author, a world famous children books illustrator was born in former Czechoslovakia under the Communist regime and he presents the way of life during that terrible period as seen with the children eyes. The book is illustrated with the child-like, but artistic drawings. One might classify it as Comics for the gifted children. Since the facts are refined by the child lenses, I would recommend to read it together with the parents and I am certain that both sides will benefit. Specifically two chapters titled "From my Journals", where the necessary historical ,political events are recorded, could be fully understood only by the High school and higher up students. Since I lived under that system during my adolescence years I could testify for the accuracy of the facts with the understandable omission of the gruesome show trials, where the innocent people were sent to gallows or to heavy imprisonment in the concentration camps. We are aware that it is for the children and we hope that they will learn from it more than our generation did from the books for the adults. I could voice only one critical comment. The author did not explain how this system came to power as experienced by a common man. Especially the children are prone to follow the logic of the "good guys" against the "bad ones". In general it followed the same path as any would-be totalitarian system. The Communist Party did not proclaim its final goal: total power. In the transient democratic period it promised to the masses essentially a heaven on the earth, for any problem, however complicated offered simple solution, in other words they pretended to be "good guys" and they succeeded... Once in power the Communists simply did not allow any free elections. Of course they were helped by the threat of the Soviet invasion, which had to come anyway many years later. This way presented lesson could help better to-days children to orient in the politics around us. I strongly recommend this book as an educational and entertaining medium for the whole

Totalitarian regimes make for good children's books. They just do. What could be more inherently exciting plot-wise than a world in which you never know who to trust? Where children report parents to the police and freedom and creativity are stifled under the boots of oppressors? That makes for good copy. This year alone we've the Cultural Revolution book, *A Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party* by Ying Chang Compestine and the much discussed Peter Sis title, *"The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain."* *"The Wall"* brings together your standard gorgeous Peter Sis imagery with content that is sure to cause debate and interest. Though it's not a book I would necessarily site as a personal favorite and that I have a couple issues with, I appreciate that Sis has created something worth discussing with kids, teens, and adults alike. He was born at the very beginning of The Cold War in Czechoslovakia. A kid with a penchant for drawing, right from the start, we watch as the growth of young Sis is paralleled with the rise of fear in his nation. Peter draws at home and at school and alongside this story we read of the compulsory and discouraged actions both required and prohibited by the government. The drawn sections are broken up by journal entries Sis wrote at the time, reflecting his beliefs and dreams. With the late 1960s, Sis was entranced by Western influences, a dangerous thing at the time. Near the end, Sis dreams of flying away above it all with wings made out of his art. His escape is cemented by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and an Afterword explains how he left and what Prague is like now. This is certainly an earnest book. Not humorless, but certainly gung ho in its love of all things American. It's difficult to criticize a book on that basis since what Sis has gone through is unlike anything I could understand or appreciate. The book feels like a cathartic release but it lacks distance. There's a danger of the author being almost too close to his material. Compare *"The Wall"* to *Persepolis* and you see the difference. The content is similar but the approach varies wildly. Satrapi is part of the story and, at the same time, removed. She doesn't simplify the story into strict terms, but instead allows the audience to draw their own conclusions based on the information she presents to you. I just don't feel that Sis has done that here. He tells you what to think of the subject matter and when to think it. For example, without batting an eye he suggests that Europe is said to contain, "Truth. Integrity. Honor. Liberty. Virtue," etc. while on the East side of the Berlin Wall there is only, "Envy. Stupidity. Lies," and so forth. He has every right to do so, particularly when you consider that this may be an image of what the young Sis believed lay in the West rather than what was really there. Unfortunately, as it currently stands, the image suggests that the readership not draw their own conclusions and accept the "Virtue" on top of Western Europe and the "Envy" on top of the Eastern half. Even the

oppressors are featured with pig noses rather than looking like average everyday joes. How much more interesting it might have been to make the bad guys as human as the good guys. How much more interesting if, like Satrapi, he'd been able to take that one baby step backwards and not tell us what to believe. Audience has never bothered Peter Sis, so I doubt we should let it bother us either. To my mind, this book is ideal for high school students. You can teach and teach the Cold War to them all day, but unless they get a little primary source material presented in an interesting fashion, who knows how much information they're actually going to take in? Kids might like this book, but they probably won't be able to understand the journal passages. I appreciated that Sis did find a way to make the book kid-friendly, though. At the bottom of each page are sections that can be read to kids and that make sense of young Peter's life. It's only when you read the captions that pop up on the sides of these pictures that you understand the background behind such innocuous statements as, "He didn't question what he was being told." The journal passages were especially interesting to me. I liked the photographs of young Sis (particularly the hunky mop top with the raised eyebrow) and the glimpses of his art surrounding these passages. It was particularly interesting that Sis' professor at the Academy of Applied Arts was Adolf Hoffmeister who wrote "Brundibar". I wonder now how Sis felt about the Tony Kushner/Maurice Sendak picture book version of that tale. The information and details found in these journals just about make up for the lack of a Bibliography in the back. I suppose that since this is a first-hand account, Sis didn't need to scout out kid-friendly sources to give some context to his lesson. Still, that means that we're being told what to think about these events without a secondary source of any sort. It would be nice if kids were able to learn more about these times on their own, say, with a list of useful websites or books on the subject. I've been discussing whether or not Bibliographies are necessary in picture books. Maybe not always, but if I'm going to recommend this book to teens as well as kids as a bit of non-fiction (and the Dewey call number is 943.704092, after all) then I'm going to want some secondary sources. The comic book bloggers have been calling this book a picture book graphic novel, and have claimed "The Wall" as their own. It's a very interesting take. At first glance I just assumed that this story was similar in its layout and structure to the Galileo and Darwin books Sis has put out before. And it is, in a way, but then I took a closer look at the structure. Though this is not the case on every page, the art is consistently broken into panels. There aren't speech balloons or much in the way of text integrated within the pictures. Because the words surround the pictures, the eye has something to dance between. The tiny dot style Sis employs here works beautifully within the context of the story. Colors stand out against a black and white background. With the exception of the color red, nothing in Prague is allowed to be colorful. Only Westernized objects and

ideas appear in anything but pen and ink. The two-page multi-colored spread of the Spring of 1968 (shown here) stands in sharp contrast to the red-infused earlier spread of Stalinism and its ilk. Sis hasn't won a Caldecott Award proper quite yet. He's been honored for "Tibet Through the Red Box" and "Starry Messenger" (not "The Tree of Life, bizarrely) but "The Wall" is bound to be the best bet he's had yet. It's a beautiful book and no one is going to contest that. Shoot, it's already gotten at least four starred reviews in professional journals and is bound to garner some more. Come award season it'll sweep the nominations and everyone will get to hear a lovely Peter Sis speech (he's a very good public speaker) and it will all be lovely and droll. I don't object to the book winning, but I do wish the heavy hand guiding it could have trusted the audience a little and not spelled out its message quite so blatantly (i.e. "America to the rescue"). It's quite an accomplishment but one that could have stood a drop of irony in the mix.

This wonderful book manages to be both creative and insightful, documenting life behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War in words and graphic design. Peter Sis's use of color in his intricate illustrations highlights and enhances the matter-of-fact language of his text. He has managed to create a journal, biography, and social/historical commentary that is fascinating reading for older children and adults alike.

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