

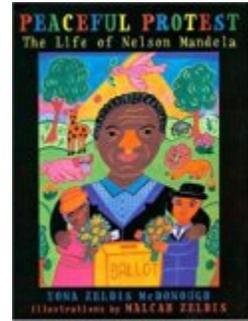
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Yona Zeldis McDonough. *Peaceful Protest: The Life of Nelson Mandela*. New York: Walker and Company, 2002. 40 pp. Ages 4-8. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8027-8823-8.

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Clear Portrayal of a Great Man, but Ill-Researched Images of Africa

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The text of Yona Zeldis McDonough's book, clearly tailored to a younger audience, provides a solid introduction to the life struggles and accomplishments of Nelson Mandela. The book explores issues of family, injustice, the importance of education as well as how crucial it is to stand up for one's beliefs and to pursue one's dreams despite opposition.

McDonough begins her forty-page story in Mandela's birthplace of Mvezo and ends with his inaugural address as the first black president of South Africa. She includes a helpful chronology, pronunciation guide and a bibliography. The text describes Mandela's fond memories of a simple childhood herding cattle, followed by the death of his father at a young age. The book tells of Mandela's education, from primary school to his acceptance at the University of Fort Hare—a prestigious college that has educated some of the brightest minds from the continent of Africa. McDonough recounts Mandela's rite of passage into manhood. We meet his first wife Evelyn Mase and his second wife Nomzamo Winifred Madikizela. The text depicts Mandela's increased commitment and activism with the political party of the African National Congress (ANC). McDonough explains how the horror of the Sharpeville incident unfolded as well as Mandela's eventual arrest and imprisonment for life on Robben Island. The author then details the hardships that Mandela faced during his twenty-seven years in prison, showing

how the world's call for divestment from South Africa fueled Mandela's eventual release.

This book does a good job of condensing Mandela's autobiography for young readers and would definitely add to the curriculum of any unit on South Africa. Some of Zeldis' illustrations clearly show the inequality that still exists in South Africa today, e.g., fancy shopping areas built adjacent to townships. Her landscapes provide a good sense of spatial depth.

That being said, there are crucial details of Mandela's life that are glossed over or westernized. For example, McDonough made no mention of circumcision as key to a young man's rite of passage into adulthood. I know this is a text for young children, so perhaps including this particular detail would be inappropriate. However, circumcision is paramount to a young man achieving an increased role in his society. You will never be considered a man unless this is performed. Another simplification, that I found unfortunate, was the mention of Mandela's father having four wives as was the "African custom." Perhaps if this is routinely common for the Thembu or Xhosa people, then this should have been specifically stated, in order to quell the notion that all African men have multiple wives. McDonough also mentions that Mandela would play with his "half-brothers and half-sisters." In his autobiography Mandela clearly states that for him the differentiation between half-brothers and half-sisters is a western distinction. For Mandela they were simply his brothers and sisters. On a logistical level,

it would have been quite helpful if in the bibliography McDonough provided, she had indicated which books were intended for children versus adults.

At first glance, I found the color illustrations of this book absolutely delightful and engaging. But on closer examination, the illustrations make the book difficult to recommend to young readers. On the one hand, the genre of folk art makes it inviting to young children. The bright colors and the chunky depictions would be fascinating to kids. However, images of Africa, especially for young children, must be handled delicately. Having seen other work by Zeldis, I feel these illustrations were rushed and show only a neophyte's ability to depict black characters. The characters seem genderless and emotionless, and at times her illustrations either reinforce stereotypes or provide misinformation. Here are a few examples. First, the village of Qunu, where Mandela spent part of his childhood, is mostly treeless, yet is drawn with trees everywhere. Second, the traditional Thembu blankets dyed in ochre that were worn by women and children, have been painted to look like Superman capes—when in fact they were intended to be worn wrapped around one shoulder and pinned at the waist. Also, black Africans do wear shoes, even if it is only flip-flops. This is especially true in urban areas such as Johannesburg. Zeldis failed to shoe most of the black characters in this book.

Third the illustration of Nelson's first day at school is an important one as it conveys to the reader the absolute seriousness of attending school. However, Zeldis portrays the students in this illustration as bare-chested. Those students in the background, who are partially hidden by their desks, look naked. Based on Mandela's autobiography, we know that Nelson wore a pair of cutoffs with a rope belt to school. McDonough stressed in the text of the book that British ways were seen as superior. Thus it is unlikely that a teacher would allow children to attend school barely clothed. Fourth, the depiction of Nelson as a young activist holding African National Congress meetings does an excellent job of showing the efforts of the ANC to cut across color lines. However, everyone but Nelson seems to be emotionless, and had they

not been clothed in skirts or dresses, it would be difficult to determine the men from the women. Fifth, Zeldis' rendition of Mandela on Robben Island, working in the lime quarry, is disheartening. Based on the autobiography, we know that each prisoner was issued "a pair of short trousers, a rough khaki shirt, a canvas jacket, socks, sandals and a cloth cap." Zeldis depicts prisoners wearing only short blue shorts without shoes.

Sixth, the front cover begins well, with Nelson Mandela welcoming a black South African woman and a pinkish South African man to the ballot box. However, the rest of the cover, alas, crowds numerous generic African icons into one illustration. There are all the animals one might find in Kruger National Park (giraffes, zebras, lions and furry pink things) with the dove of peace, complete with olive sprig, flying over an Egyptian Pyramid. This choice of cover image begs the question what is more important, realism or folk-art expression. Lastly, when young children pick up a picture book that is focused on a single character, they attempt to identify that character in the illustrations throughout the book. Most of the scenes in this publication showed nondescript groupings of black men, which made it difficult to pinpoint Mandela, unless he was figured prominently.

In summary, McDonough's book provides a good overview of Nelson Mandela's life, and I would recommend this book on a textual level. However, because of the poorly researched nature of the illustrations, I would give it an "Advisory" rating. In order for this book not to fuel stereotypes or provide misinformation about Africa, a teacher, librarian or a family member would need to discuss with children what they think of the African continent and its people. This may be a pretty heavy discussion for a child of four to eight years of age.

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