



Book Review: Echo

Written by Pam Muñoz Ryan

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*Your fate is not yet sealed. Even in the darkest night, a star will shine, a bell will chime, a path will be revealed. (p.25)*

*Echo* blends genres; framed by a tale of magic and mystery, with the bulk of the story told across three distinct settings of historical fiction. The uniting themes across each of the four sections include the power of music, the dangers of intolerance, and the powerful results of choosing compassion and courage over selfishness and fear. A (perhaps magical?) harmonica travels through each tale, from the fairy tale inspired prologue to the stories of Friedrich in Germany, Mike in Pennsylvania, and Ivy in California.

The book opens with the story of Otto, lost alone in a forest, who encounters three cursed sisters trapped by a witch's spell. The sisters save his life, guiding him from the clutches of the forest and entrusting him with two things—a special harmonica and the charge to someday save their lives.

Part I: Friedrich, a young musician and aspiring conductor, is socially shunned due to his awkwardness and the physical deformity of a large facial birthmark. In 1933, the Nazi party prizes their version of physical, intellectual, and racial perfection. Friedrich's father is pressured to report him to the Nazi party for his intellectual and physical conditions, but doing so would mean Friedrich would be sterilized (or worse). Friedrich's sister has joined the Nazi Youth movement and the family fears that she might report their political views. During this turmoil, Friedrich discovers a majestically crafted harmonica and finds a sense of inner peace and courage while playing it that he will desperately need when his father is imprisoned in a work camp. Can Friedrich find the resources and daring to rescue his father?

Part II: The same harmonica surfaces two years later in rural Pennsylvania, in the hands of orphans Mike and Frankie. Mike is a gifted piano player and all-around musician who dreams of a better life for himself and his younger brother. Living in an abusive boys' home, their hope to be adopted seems to be slipping away as they grow older. When a man shows up at the orphanage looking for boys with musical talent, the two are saved from the orphanage and their luck seems to have changed. However, their new guardian seems anything but excited about adopting two boys, in fact she avoids them at all costs. Can Mike figure out a way to save Frankie from returning to the orphanage? Could his musical talent save him as well? A harmonica contest might be the answer to his problems.

Part III: When Ivy must start a new school, one of her only comforts is the hope of an excellent music program. She misses her old school and even more, she misses her older brother Fernando who is away fighting in World War II. Her talent with the harmonica makes her hopeful she might someday play the flute and she writes long letters to Fernando about her hopes and dreams. But in 1944 in Southern California, Ivy cannot attend the neighborhood Lincoln School as it is for white children only. Instead, she must go to a school for Mexican children, even though she speaks English fluently. She soon discovers that prejudice and fear are problems throughout the area; neighbors of Japanese descent have been removed from their homes and sent to internment camps. How can Ivy pursue her dreams when the laws and schools seem against her and against anyone who is seen as an ‘other’?

The stories of Otto, Friedrich, Mike, and Ivy eventually intertwine and collide. Is it just happenstance? Will the power of music and an enchanted harmonica save each of them from their struggles? The reader must decide how much of the story’s resolution is due to destiny, fate, and magic and how much can be credited to the compassion, strength, and natural talents of each of the main protagonists.

What is certain is that Pam Muñoz Ryan has crafted a powerfully interwoven story of friendship, perseverance, and bravery. Although the finely drawn and incredibly likeable characters are one of the most compelling features of this book, so is the beautiful language throughout with the words calling to be read aloud. Additionally, the themes encourage students and teachers to grapple with issues and events related to social justice and critical literacy, examining how both historical and current events position and penalize marginalized groups.

Echo is another powerfully written tale by the author of other gems of children’s literature such as *Esperanza Rising* (2000), *Riding Freedom* (1999), and *The Dreamer* (2010). Pam Muñoz Ryan was born and raised in Bakersfield, California and was a bilingual classroom teacher for many years; while pursuing her master’s degree in education a professor encouraged her to consider writing professionally. Her first children’s book, *One Hundred is a Family*, was published in 1994. She is the recipient of two Pura Belpré Awards, the Virginia Hamilton Award for Multicultural Literature, the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, and the Schneider Family Book Award. Information on her work is found on her website.

Marie LeJeune, Western Oregon University



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