



The Outlaw

Written and Illustrated by Nancy Vo

Groundwood Books, 2018, 42 pp.

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Set in the Old West, this picturebook tells of a town terrorized by the regular appearance of an outlaw and his deeds. Eventually, he ceases to visit the town and fear subsides. Enter another character who engages in acts that improve and repair the small town, such as mending roofs, building needed horse troughs and repairing railway ties. One image reveals a young boy with bread and sausages running from a woman; the turn of the page reveals an implicit story of the stranger supporting the boy as the food has been returned to the woman. Eventually, someone recognizes the stranger as the outlaw and the fear returns as a crowd gathers to cast blame. The young boy stands up for the former outlaw and demands of the adults, "Leave him alone. He's trying." Eventually the crowds disperse and the stranger "continued to make amends." The somewhat passive ending leaves readers reflective of the final words, "And maybe that was what mattered in the end"--an open ending that begs thoughtfulness about the difficulty and ultimate purpose of making restitutions.

The striking illustrations are created with ink, watercolor and transfer of newspaper clippings and fabric patterns from the mid-1800s scattered subtly on each page. The neutral and sepia images focus on the simplicity of the acts and the sleepy nature of the town. The sparse text and use of white space add meaning to reading the illustrations that capture the characters, context and tone of this story.

In an interview with Heather Camlot, Canadian Nancy Vo describes her beginnings in children's book illustration as inspired by Jon Klassen. The main character in *The Outlaw*, she shares, is modeled after the Eli Sisters in *The Sisters Brothers* (Patrick deWitt, 2011). Vo researched the setting of *The Sisters Brothers*, 1850s Oregon and California at the height of the Gold Rush, as she created illustrations of pen and watercolor with "acetone transfers, which allowed her to transpose period textile patterns, bottle labels and reprinted newspaper clippings" (www.quillandquire.com). With degrees in chemistry, fine arts and architecture, Nancy Vo currently works as a facility planner while drawing and illustrating at night.

As a new creator of children's books, her illustrative style can be seen on her website (www.nancyvo.com). *The Ranger*, scheduled for fall of 2019, is an upcoming companion picturebook to *The Outlaw* and she is currently planning yet another, *The Priest*, to follow. Until these books arrive, other books to pair include *Each Kindness* (Jacqueline Woodson, 2012) that supports discussion about remorse, kindness and opportunities to make amends vs opportunities lost. *The Outlaw* can be paired with books on bullying such as *The Juice Box Bully: Empowering Kids to Stand Up for Others* (Sornson, 2010) in which a would-be bully is shown a different way to act by his friends. This book also reveals the importance of standing up for others, as did the child in *The Outlaw*.

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