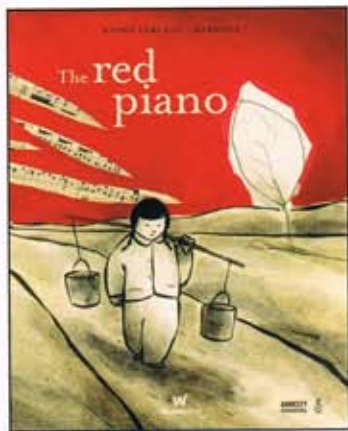


Picture Books for Older Readers



The Red Piano (2009)

André Leblanc, ill. Barroux,
Wilkins Farago, 36pp.

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Pianos are criminal.

Pianists are criminal.

For the anonymous young girl of **The Red Piano**, five years resident at Zhangjiakou Camp 46-19 on China's border with Outer Mongolia, a run-down old piano is a means of bringing some humanity into her life and into a system that has none. She bravely defies the cant of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution and steals away each night to surreptitiously play on the battered instrument which has been secreted in a house in the outer village. Sheet by sheet, hidden in parcels from Beijing, she gradually assembles the music and copies it into tiny concealable hand-made notebooks. For three years, every evening, for two hours after the work in the fields and the self-criticism class, her hands rediscover the grumbling old piano. Playing for the love of music. It's as simple as that! And then she is caught at the piano. She and her 'accomplice', old Mother Han in whose house the instrument was secreted, are publicly denounced and stridently mocked and the piano is smashed into firewood. The harsh consequences are commensurate with the intense contempt the Red Guard holds for decadent culture and elitism and those who defy the new order. Only when Chairman Mao dies does the music in her heart re-emerge; she, the last inmate to leave the re-education camp.

The Red Piano is inspired by the life of the renowned concert pianist, Zhu Xiao-Mei. She is the young girl, a child prodigy who had spent six years at a Beijing music school for gifted children until the madness of the Cultural Revolution broke up her family and dispersed them to camps around the country.

This is a magnificent book in every respect. The prose is succinct and piquant in its phrasing; like the girl who warms up with a Bach Prelude rather than hammering at the keyboard like a maniac, as Mother Han admonishes, the text quietly leads the reader into the girl's life and onto an appreciation of the wider conditions under which she lives. The pictures are powerfully illustrative of the pathos of the girl's lot and the insidious influence of the Communist doctrine. They are scaled and composed to maximum effect. Dramatic slashes of the water-color brush from a dun palette hint at calligraphic influences, judicious splashes of vermilion effectively and ideologically besmirch the landscapes and all activity. In some scenes are incorporated contemporary newspaper graphics such as Mao and propagandist images of cheerful workers.

An inspiring story that transcends its depiction of a moment in history to illustrate the indomitability of the human spirit.

Kevin Steinberger