

CHILDREN'S

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The Red Piano

Andre Leblanc; ills.,
Stephane-Yves Barroux
Wilkins Farago, \$27.99
Reviewer *Dianne Dempsey*

FIRST published in France, *The Red Piano*, with its striking illustrations and haunting story, is clearly a work of love. Aimed at young children, it is a lavishly produced picture book. The author, artist and historian Andre Leblanc was inspired to write the book after meeting exiled international piano virtuoso Zhu Xiao-Mei in 2007 and hearing her extraordinary story.

Zhu Xiao-Mei was sent to a labour camp in Mongolia as a young girl during the Cultural Revolution. She had been a prodigy but was taken from her family and forced to labour for long hours in miserable conditions. She persuaded her mother to smuggle a piano into the camp and there, in secrecy, she practised in the cold, dark hours of the night. She was finally caught and her piano was destroyed. She was interned for five years and was the last person from her camp to be released.

Some of the language will need to be explained to children — "Now children, does anybody know what human rights means?" — but Stephane-Yves Barroux's illustrations have an instant impact. The tones are black, red and creamy yellow, and the figures are executed with broad powerful strokes.

The illustrations immediately take the reader into a bizarre world where nothing makes sense; in this world music is discouraged and children are punished for loving it.