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The Secret Project



Synopsis

Mother-son team Jonah and Jeanette Winter bring to life one of the most secretive scientific projects in history—the creation of the atomic bomb—in this powerful and moving picture book. At a former boys' school in the remote desert of New Mexico, the world's greatest scientists have gathered to work on the "Gadget," an invention so dangerous and classified they cannot even call it by its real name. They work hard, surrounded by top security and sworn to secrecy, until finally they take their creation far out into the desert to test it, and afterward the world will never be the same.

Book Information

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Age Range: 5 - 8 years

Grade Level: Kindergarten - 3

Customer Reviews

A picture book takes on the creation of the atomic bomb. "In the beginning," the story opens, with overtones of Genesis, and it does, indeed, become a story of creation and elemental powers of the universe. The first two pages suggest a Roxaboxen-style celebration of a desert playscape, but then the secret project—the Manhattan Project—unfolds. The local boys' school is closed, scientists arrive at a place that doesn't even really exist yet, and shadowy figures get to work creating a "Gadget" of enormous power. Ingeniously, Jeanette Winter's illustrations balance the dark, cloaked secrecy of Los Alamos, signified by silhouetted figures viewed through

windows, with the bright beauty of the outer world—the mesas, cacti, coyotes, prairie dogs, and desert mountains; Hopi artists carving dolls out of wood "as they have done for centuries;" and Georgia O'Keefe painting a gorgeous desert scene. Jonah Winter's text is eloquent, and his mother's acrylic-and-pen illustrations evoke a beautiful landscape in danger if the scientists' contraption works. When the bomb explodes, the monstrous mushroom cloud grows over four pages, concluding with a pitch-black double-page spread and no further text, which will leave young readers eager to know more. An informative author's note will help adults provide the historical context. An astonishing way to lay the groundwork for such works for older readers as Steve Sheinkin's *Bomb* (2012), this is a beautifully told introduction to a difficult subject. (Informational picture book. 3-7) (Kirkus Reviews ***STARRED REVIEW*** 11/1/16) Though it's notorious now, the Manhattan Project was veiled in the deepest secrecy while scientists researched and developed the atomic bomb, and it's that confidentiality this somber picture book takes as its focus. Nearby townspeople, even some of the laborers who worked at the lab, had no idea what was going on, and the scientists working on splitting the atom can barely say their goals out loud: "What they are trying to invent is so secret, they cannot even call it by name." Jeanette Winter's marvelous, flat vignette illustrations show beautiful, detailed desert landscapes in rich colors and residents merrily going about their daily lives, but the scientists are all rendered in shadowy grays and blacks, sometimes only appearing as silhouettes. All that changes, though, when the scientists, looking utterly shocked, blow up the bomb: a fiery mushroom cloud grows ever larger over several pages, and the book ends joltingly with a spread of featureless black, before a concluding author's note offers additional information about the bomb and its ultimate effects. While it's difficult to imagine this resonating with the typical picture book reader, the quiet—and then abruptly explosive—tone is spot-on, cultivating both curiosity and unease, as if this is a secret we'd rather not know. Expect plenty of questions after sharing this with children, though it's likely that's precisely the point. — Sarah Hunter (Booklist, **STARRED REVIEW** December 1, 2016) Secrets seldom come grimmer than in this unsettling tale, which describes the Los Alamos nuclear lab and the creation of the atomic bomb. The mother-son team behind *Diego* and other picture book biographies pairs an informational tone with simmering ambiguity. Their story opens on "a peaceful desert mountain landscape, where a coyote howls, an artist (Georgia O'Keefe) paints, and a Hopi man carves a kachina doll. After the government commandeers a private school, "the most brilliant scientists in the world" arrive to take up nighttime research, their twilight activities contrasting with sunny New

Mexico settings in ochre, pink, violet, and sage. Jonah Winter repeatedly refers to “shadowy figures” at work on a mysterious “Gadget,” and Jeanette Winter pictures them as anonymous, steel-gray silhouettes. When the men gather in a bunker to test the Gadget, the narration disappears. In a chilling wordless sequence with a drab, light-sucking background, a white-gold and blood-red mushroom cloud blossoms, followed by an empty spread in glossy black. An author’s note explains what happened next. Sure to spark conversation about ethics and the use of nuclear weaponry, this powerful book demands a wide readership. Ages 5–8. (Publishers Weekly *STARRED REVIEW* December 5, 2016) A moving, nonpreachy springboard for older elementary grade and middle school discussions of the Manhattan Project or nuclear weapons in general. (School Library Journal January 2017) A peaceful, remote boys’ school is abruptly evacuated and closed under government order when “the principal was told that his school was needed for important government work.” Then come the scientists, “driven to this secret location, which has no name,” and the support workers, “sworn to secrecy about the existence of this place.” Scientists make calculations; they are under time pressure and apparently in a rivalry with other scientists, working with elements that “can be turned into something with enormous power.” At last it’s ready. There’s a tower, a Gadget, a bunker, a countdown. Then a blast like no other blast known. The point at which readers recognize the nature of the Gadget and the Secret Project—or whether, in fact, they do recognize it before Jonah Winter’s revelatory endnote—makes this clever exposition of the World War II development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos an unusually effective and highly individualized reading experience. Steve Sheinkin’s *Bomb* (BCCB 10/12) delivered this story with heart-pumping pacing and nail-biting detail, but this picture-book gem takes the opposite approach, reducing the historical episode to its elemental, quasi-folkloric core, and shifting the audience into the role of an average, early 1940s American Joe, who has been kept in the dark about the nation’s lethal program and is about to discover the unimaginably high cost of winning a war. Jonah Winter’s text is accessible to a young audience, and children who know nothing of the Manhattan Project (never called by that name here) will thrill to a conspiracy story with an ending so thunderous that it initially resonates as fiction rather than fact; the picture-book format may even reinforce that naïf perspective. Those who know what’s coming, however, see in the visual interplay of mystery and innocence something very different. Jeanette Winter’s pictures move eerily and seamlessly among the sun-drenched, wide open New Mexico landscape where artists come to paint and the tenebrous, hidden rooms and labs in which

scientists—portrayed as ebony figures outlined in gray—carry out their top secret agenda. The blast itself mushrooms in a four-page, four-panel sequence, followed by a concluding double-page spread of pitch black. There's no conclusion, no "The End," because of course there is no ending—just the imminent and horrifying disclosure of the Secret Project at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the nuclear legacy with which we now live. A picture book's powerful potential to reach multiple audiences at varied levels of prior knowledge and understanding is on full display here, and adults tasked with shepherding youth of all ages through the darkest episodes of history will appreciate so moving and versatile a guide. The youngest audience will learn the facts, but the sinister implications a secret government project and the unimaginable consequences of covert research will impel an older readership to confront their grim inheritance of "15,700 nuclear weapons still in existence throughout the world," and to work toward a "day that number will be zero." (Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books *STARRED REVIEW* January 2017) You mightn't think the Manhattan Project would be a likely subject for the tidy iconographer Jeanette Winter, even while such books as *Mama* (about the Indian Ocean earthquake) and *The Librarian of Basra* (about the Iraq War) demonstrated her interest in, thematically, the big picture. The text by Winter fills unfussily grounds the story in its landscape—the mountains of northern New Mexico—observing the transformation of a "quiet little boys' school" into a "secret location which has no name" where scientists work on the code-named "Gadget." The eerie, silhouetted paintings of the bomb-makers at work contrast dramatically with the pink-purple illustrations of the desert outside (where another Winter subject, Georgia O'Keeffe, is seen painting a mesa). When the Gadget is secretly moved to its testing grounds, the palette grows more ominous, fading to gray for the countdown, and then the pictures spectacularly erupt in both size and color for the detonation. The closing spread is completely, ominously black. An author's note supplies more information about the event and its repercussions, but the text itself, concise and thorough, stands on its own, its dispassionate accounting just the right counterpoint to the contained terror in the art. (The Horn Book *STARRED REVIEW* March/April 2017) This picture book tells the story of the secret creation of the atomic bomb. An all boys' school in a desert location is closed, taken over by the government, and becomes the laboratory for the world's most intelligent scientists. They gather to work in secrecy to create a "gadget." The project is so secret that many of the people working there have no idea what is being created. Jeanette Winter's illustrations depict a bright and cheerful desert life, while conversely shrouding the scientists and their work in darkness,

showing silhouetted figures in shadowy, ominous colors. Once the “gadget” is complete, they travel deep into the secluded desert to test it out, observing it from afar. The final pages feature only the powerful images of the scientists watching the results of their creation explode into clouds and plumes of fire and destruction. The plain, black endpapers suggest harsh finality. Jonah Winter’s honest depiction, accompanied by the vivid and detailed artwork, tells the creation of the atomic bomb with expertise and tact. The end of the book features an author’s note, followed by a page of suggestions for further reading. This is an excellent historical, as well as scientific, picture book offering opportunity for rich discussion among student readers and educators. **Highly Recommended** (School Library Connection May/June 2017)

Jonah Winter is the author of more than thirty celebrated nonfiction picture books including *Diego*, illustrated by Jeanette Winter; *Jazz Age Josephine*, illustrated by Marjorie Priceman; *Sonia Sotomayor: A Judge Grows in the Bronx*, illustrated by Edel Rodriguez; *The Founding Fathers!* illustrated by Barry Blitt; and *Lillian’s Right to Vote: A Celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965*, illustrated by Shane W. Evans. Jeanette Winter is a renowned picture book creator whose acclaimed works include *Nanuk the Ice Bear*; *Malala, A Brave Girl from Pakistan*/Iqbal, *A Brave Boy from Pakistan: Two Stories of Bravery*; *Henri’s Scissors*; *Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia*; *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq*; and *Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan*.

This is a fantastic picture book explaining the development of the nuclear bomb in a way appropriate for children, and as a springboard for further reading. I have read other chapter books that deal with this topic, but this would be a fantastic way to get students curious about this event in history. Winter’s illustrations are fantastic, bringing this story to life. The text is spare, allowing for readers to spend time with the illustrations and really see what is happening in this community which was once a school for boys, but is now a place for a bomb to be developed and tested. A two-page author’s note at the end of this book gives more information for older readers or those wanting to know more about this topic. This is a must have for school library collections, more appropriate for readers grade three and up

I’m a longtime fan of Jonah Winter’s work. I’ll add this book (illustrated by his mother) to the list of the many reasons I remain such a fan. Writing a children’s book about the Manhattan Project is not a simple matter, and many authors would avoid it entirely. To his credit, Winter tackles the subject,

handling it in a sensitive and morally complex way that is appropriate for younger audiences. The sparse, elegiac prose is complemented beautifully by the deeply arresting images. This is the perfect starting place for any parent looking to introduce their children to more complex subjects without overwhelming them. This is a must have.

What an incredible risk to take, creating a picture book about the creation of the atomic bomb. A mother-son team not only take that risk but create a book that is heart pounding, historical and riveting. In a shut-down school in the desert of New Mexico, a very secret project begins. The world's greatest scientists gather to work on the "Gadget." They work day and night working to cut an atom in half. After two years of work, the device is ready to be tested. The book ends with a countdown to the test and the resulting mushroom cloud. Told in the simplest of language, this picture book looks at the process of building the atomic bomb, the secrecy of the project and the skill and time that it took. There is a constant growing foreboding as the project continues, as the science progresses. This book is not about the importance of the weapon and does not glorify it in any way. Instead it brings the science down to nuts and bolts, looks at the damage that it creates, and ends in a way that makes sure to leave readers with their heart in their throats. The illustrations have a strong sense of formality and control to them. Each is framed in a square box and the rest of the page is white. They are almost tiles that decorate the wall for the reader. That all changes as the test begins and suddenly the strict rules are broken wide open, adding to the drama of the end. Stunning, powerful and brave, this picture book belongs in all library collections. Appropriate for ages 6-8.

Writing history for kids used to be a simple affair. I remember from my own youth the deadly dull books that somehow seemed to always cover the same subjects over and over again. You'd have the major wars. The occasional biography of one of the ten usual subjects for kids (Earhart, Edison, King, etc.). Maybe, if you were lucky, you'd find a book on how people lived in the olden days but that was as far as you'd get. Complex subject matter and topics were just that. Complex. Few people felt inclined to explain things like Japanese internment camps or the Trail of Tears or any other number of American atrocities to children. There is a school of thought that believes that kids aren't ready for opposing viewpoints or multifaceted readings of events from the past. What's good is good, what's bad is bad, and the gray middle ground is left for middle and high school. It's not like that today. Today

there's an interest in producing picture books that speak to historical moments that aren't as neat and tidy as, say, breaking off from Mother England. And I think it's fairly safe to say that until this moment in time nobody ever took a serious stab at writing a picture book about the birth of the atom bomb. Doesn't matter if you're pro. Doesn't matter if you're con. Here is a moment that happened in history. Your kids deserve to know about it. We owe them that much. It was a boy's school at the start. Until, that is, it wasn't. The principal got a note from the government and the boys all cleared out. They were replaced by scientists. Scientists assigned to a secret location, aided by workers and guards who had no idea what was going on. The scientists themselves were working on something called a "Gadget". They were thinking about atoms and metals with names like "uranium" and "plutonium". And then, one day, they were finished. They drove into the desert to test it. Set it off. And saw the mushroom cloud and the colors and, finally, nothing at all. Winter's writing is pared down here to its essential core. He's judicious with his word use. Gone is the loquaciousness you might find in books like *Founding Fathers!* or *The Fabulous Feud of Gilbert and Sullivan*. The very first lines in this book read, "In the beginning, there was just a peaceful desert mountain landscape. We're in Biblical country here, people, and the fall of man is just a scant 36 pages away. The facts are laid bare for one and all to see, but it's the way the author presents them that sticks with the reader. Listen to these lines: "What they are trying to invent is so secret, they cannot even call it by its real name." "These great scientists must complete their secret invention." "It is hardly even imaginable." In some of his books Mr. Winter has an inclination to speculate. There's a bit of that here, but it's kept in check. The scientists "emerge from the shadows, pale and tired and hollow-eyed". Later, "The great scientists gather around their creation in silence, wondering if it will work." But these leaps are logical ones. Entirely presumable and understandable. He hasn't filled in fake dialogue here or said anything that couldn't be inherently understood. It is the job of the nonfiction picture book writer to stick to the facts and yet also make their books potentially interesting to four to seven-year-olds. Striking the right balance is an art, and in this book Mr. Winter makes it clear that he's taken everything he's learned over the

years and applied it. Some of the choices Mr. Winter makes with the text linger. He takes time to leave Los Alamos behind, from time to time. He visits the people living in the region, with special attention paid to the artists. He makes a point to shine a spotlight on the hired workers who were brought in “to cook, to clean, to guard.” We see a Hopi artist carving wood and a white painter who bears a striking similarity to Georgia O’Keeffe. All this is to make clear to the reader that what happened at Los Alamos didn’t occur in a vacuum. That there was life outside the gadget. Life that would be considerably altered by what the scientists were doing. When you read the Author’s Note you find that Mr. Winter is not chintzy with the details on the destruction caused by the “gadget.” He lists the number of years it will take before the site of the first atom bomb testing grounds will be free of radioactivity (24,100 years). He mentions the fact that the U.S. is only now studying the cancerous effects on the populace of New Mexico from this test. He talks about the number of Japanese civilians “many of them children” who died of the bomb’s effects in World War II (between 164,000 and 214,000). He mentions the reasons for the bomb, and the fact that the U.S. was racing Germany to create it. He mentions that in the text too, for that matter. But the end of the Author’s Note is clear. “As of 2016, there are 15,700 nuclear weapons still in existence throughout the world. Hopefully some day that number will be zero.” And when you read that, the inclusion of the people living just outside of Los Alamos is clear. That’s life out there. That’s living. What the scientists were hoping to create? A possible end to all of that. It will surprise few reading this book to learn that artist Jeanette Winter created a picture book biography of Georgia O’Keeffe lo these many years ago. Unsurprisingly because in many ways I feel that this is the most O’Keeffe-inspired of Ms. Winter’s books. If Georgia O’Keeffe had taken it upon herself to disregard the skulls and flowers and landscapes of the New Mexico region, she might well have created as artist a rendering of the mushroom cloud as beautiful as the the one found in this book. That cloud, which takes a full four pages to blossom fully before plunging you into two pages of complete and absolute darkness, may be the most controversial in the book. Can an atom bomb be beautiful? If you render it with beauty are you, by association, giving to it some kind of tacit approval? Or is it possible that something can be beautiful and horrible all at once? Neither Jonah nor Jeanette proselytizes in this book. We know his opinion of the bomb because of the Author’s Note, but the text is strictly factual. There are arguments out there to be made for the fact that good nonfiction can be interpreted any

number of ways by its readers. A person who thinks nuclear weapons are the bee's knees is going to like this book. A person who believes that they pose a threat to the environment and humanity will also come away from this title, liking it. Why? Because it sets the facts before you but reserves commentary until that final two-page spread of black. I'll go out on a limb here and say that this may be Jeanette Winter's best book to date. In many ways her books have grown braver and more ethically complex as she's aged. This is a woman who can write a book about Matisse's paper cuts one moment and then highlight international injustices at home and abroad without so much as blinking an eye. Many of the illustrations in this book are works of clear beauty that are both of their time and outside of it. For example, the scientists working on the Manhattan Project are gray individuals. Even when they leave Los Alamos they're depicted in a deep, colorless hue. Only their ideas flare into color. Atoms, protons, neutrons - all set against a deep black background. Black like those last two pages. That black is so powerful when you read it aloud to a child. You don't look at pages of pure black without a sense of dread. Can't be done. Imagine a teacher or a librarian reading this book aloud. Picture the silence when they simply turn the page and hold up the black. It's not the only subtle commentary done with color, of course. Even the typography of the book changes. Before the government takes the land over, the text is written in green ink, but the moment the principal of the boys' school gets his letter, the text is black and remains black for almost the rest of the book. It's not just for younger kids, in spite of its packaging. This book could be read by older readers as well, and it will be. They'll come into their libraries asking for books on the bomb and the librarian will hand them this book. They'll scoff at first. A baby book? But the fact that it's supposed to be about the creation of the atom bomb will suck them in. And if they sit down to read it, they will comprehend it. They may even comprehend what it is that Jonah Winter and Jeanette Winter are trying to tell them. Or maybe not. Maybe they'll walk away thinking the bomb is beautiful. The author doesn't have ultimate control over the reader's experience. They can guide you in the right direction, but the reader is the ultimate judge. Still, the Winters manage to stick to the facts and comment without shoving a message in your face. That alone makes the book more interesting and more powerful than all the polemics on all the Facebook feeds in the world. One of the most beautiful nonfiction picture books on a too little covered moment in American history I've ever seen. Chilling, in the best sense of the word. For ages 5 and up.

Beach Lane Books, 201740 pagesRecommended for grades 4+My lovely librarian handed this to me with a: You must read this! We were both moved by the simplicity in which this heavy topic was told. How much of a contradiction there was in the innocence and in the seriousness. A purposeful contradiction. How the illustrations so perfectly portray the setting, and how the final pages of darkness will evoke deep feelings.No matter how old your students are, this would be a fantastic read aloud. It will surely spark much conversation around the Manhattan Project.

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