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Young Mekhai, better known as Bird, loves to draw. With drawings, he can erase the things that don't turn out right. In real life, problems aren't so easily fixed.

As Bird struggles to understand the death of his beloved grandfather and his older brother's drug addiction, he escapes into his art. Drawing is an outlet for Bird's emotions and imagination, and provides a path to making sense of his world. In time, with the help of his grandfather's friend, Bird finds his own special something and wings to fly.

Told with spare grace, *Bird* is a touching look at a young boy coping with real-life troubles. Readers will be heartened by Bird's quiet resilience, and moved by the healing power of putting pencil to paper.

Bird, the recipient of Lee & Low's New Voices Award Honor, is the first picture book of both Zetta Elliott and Shadra Strickland.

Bird Details

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Author : Zetta Elliott , Shadra Strickland (illustrator)

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From Reader Review Bird for online ebook

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

A young boy who likes to draw talks about his grandfather and brother, both of whom inspired him. It's also a sad story about the devastating effects of drug addiction, not only on the addict, but on the family who loves him. Bird's brother Marcus had artistic talent too, but never developed it because he got sidetracked by drugs. I personally don't see why anyone would ever want to take drugs. It never has made sense to me. However, there seems to be hope in this story that Bird will not end up like his brother. I liked Shadra Strickland's soft illustrations, which reflect the gentle, low-key handling of a gritty subject. I especially liked the one where Bird is imagining himself playing the saxophone like Charlie Parker. I will have to order this book for my library, and read more of this author's books.

jo says

An intense but beautiful book about a young boy, Bird, whose older brother has a severe drug addiction. Bird finds release, escape, and comfort through drawing. Both the illustrations and the text are very delicate, not overpowering or overstated, which makes the weight of the story easier to bear. The illustrations create something of a fragile bridge between Bird's reality and his inner thoughts. This is a tough topic for a picture book, but I think the end result is lovely and important.

Mary Ann says

a beautiful, gentle, powerful story - about a boy's relationship with his brother and grandfather, about how his family supports him as he copes with his brother's and grandfather's deaths, about his relationship with Uncle Sonny, and about his gift of drawing.

universal in a child's support by his family and sadness with the passing of his grandfather & brother, and yet so specific to the particular urban setting. complex and simple at the same time - fantastic.

Crystal says

I really enjoyed this tender story about a young boy who has lost loved ones and is trying to work through his feelings. He has a brother who was addicted to drugs and his grandfather has died. I have to say, the summary spoke of the grandfather's death, but nobody else's so there was a page that confused me. I had to read and reread when it said, "After the funeral Grandad went to bed." I flipped back to the page before and then read again. I think that may be confusing for younger readers too.

Otherwise I found it to be a story that will be thought provoking and would be great to use with an upper elementary class because there would certainly be much to discuss about the content, but also about the author's craft. The story is told poetically.

This is a great book for learning about grief and using art to express your feelings.

Bobby Simic says

There's a point in the book where a character talks about birds: "birds aren't light...We only think that they're strong." The opposite could be said for this book and the expectations we might draw from its thin size, minimal text and many pictures. But it defies expectation (or at least mine) and efficiently utilizes the little that it has and becomes an emotional story of addiction, loss, and the redemptive benefits of art.

L- Lisa says

This picture book for older readers tells the story of Bird, who loves to draw. The story weaves Bird's memory his older brother; his artistic inspiration, his addiction to drugs, being kicked out of their home and ultimate death. He also reflects on memories of his grandfather who has also died. Throughout the book Bird creates his drawings, supported by the memory of his brother and encouraged by his uncle. Uncle Son is Bird's grandfather's brother who becomes a supportive mentor in his life. The illustrations create the story line of a young boy, rising above the tragic realities in his family. He creates peace and defines hope for his future through the support of his uncle and the imagination he uses in his drawings.

I found this book a powerful example of children's literature that speaks to issues for children today. As we consider the importance of illustrations this is a wonderful example of how picture books for older students can speak to their worlds, providing inspiration and comfort. Bird is a must for classroom libraries, most appropriate for grades 6-8. It was written in 2008 and received the Coretta Scott King Award.

Rebecca says

This book was so touching. Mehkai, known as "Bird," uses drawing to help him cope with the difficulties of life, including his grandfather's death and his brother's drug addiction. The illustrations are perfect: the use of white space makes for a borderless movement between Bird's life and his drawings of life. I didn't notice until the second reading that Marcus' graffiti painting is of a bird; the bird theme is many-layered. A sad story that still manages to be hopeful, and to speak simply about difficult topics without sounding condescending. One of my new favorites.

Heather says

Text-to-Self

A classmate just put this book in front of me and I read through it casually during break, but it kept getting more intense and I found myself immersed. When I finished it I was almost in tears. The story of addiction and family and love and remembering was a very familiar one. I was very close to my grandmother ('Mema') as a girl, and was at her house more than my own. She struggled with alcohol addiction all her life, as her entire life was hard and unlucky. One Christmas Eve night when I was 14 it all came to a head when I woke

to find her grabbing a drink in the middle of the night. For some reason I decided I wasn't going to let her do it and we physically fought for awhile as I tried to pour it out. When that ordeal was over we sat and rocked in our special rocking chair for a long time and didn't speak about it again for years. Then one day out of the blue she told me she never touched alcohol after that night. She died from stomach cancer when I was about 25, and I'm sure her addiction didn't help matters with her health. Those years were hard for her, and for us, and sometimes we had to be forced to stay away at our parents' command. Addiction is scary for all and such a taboo topic. This is a beautiful but difficult story and could really be useful to children facing these issues.

JustOneMoreBook.com says

Delicate first-person verse and a stirring orchestration of watercolour, charcoal and ballpoint pen illustrations peek inside a young artist as he wrestles with his family's issues of addiction and loss.

You can listen in on our chat about this book on our Just One More Book! Children's Book Podcast.

Anna Todaro says

Anyone who thinks that a child is not going to be exposed to drug addiction at some point in their life is dreaming. Whether a family member, relative, friend, or schoolmate; there is going to be someone. This is not a race issue or an economic status issue. This is a reality issue. Will you be ready? This book should be read WITH an older person. A family member, adult, mentor. Why do I say this? Look at the protagonist in the book himself. He was not alone with this situation, he had a safety net of adults there with him, looking out for him. The reader should have the same courtesy. While there may be some kids who will be able to read it on their own, most children will be confused or will have questions. Most children, the protagonist in this story included, are often thinking of anything else but the cruelties of the world. In this story, drug addiction and death hits bluntly, changing the main character for life while showing the hard decisions of the grown ups around him as well as showing his own support group IE, his family and Uncle Son. Should there be a warning on the cover? I don't know. Do the Parental advisory stickers work?

Lyndsey Jones says

The book Birds by Zetta Elliott is a book about a young boy, Mehkai (nicknamed Bird by his Granddad) and his struggle with loosing his older brother to drugs, losing his Granddad to heart issues, as well as learning/practicing how to draw while growing up. I would consider this a Realistic Fiction text because a situation/scenario like this could actually occur in real life. Drugs, death, and hardship are very sensitive topics, but real parts of life that are discussed in this book. This makes it a struggle deciding which grade levels this book would be appropriate to use as a read aloud for. In general though, I would say that the upper elementary grades, like around 4th or 5th grade, would be an appropriate age to read this book as a read aloud with. I would use this book as a read aloud in my classroom to make room for discussion with the class because the topics that are brought up in this book are very sensitive and hard topics to talk about. I would also possibly use this book as a take home reading book, so students could go home and read it to themselves, and then have them bring it back to class the next day and have them share things they gleamed from the book with one or two peers, and then let that lead into a whole class discussion about the topics in

it. This book is a WOW book to me because it brings up the very real struggle of having a loved one who is dealing with a drug addiction, and the feeling of helplessness brought upon the family because they want to help but can't. This is very relatable to me because my first cousin was a drug addict and my family went through some really hard times because of his addiction. In addition to this though, it shows the perseverance of a child trying to get better at something he loves doing (drawing), which is very inspiring in the midst of his struggles.

Molly says

This book really touched me. It was the story of a boy whose brother was a drug addict. It broke my heart to read but I was so thankful there was an honest book out there that we could hand to a child who may be going through something like this. So well worded that it could be used with a younger age than most books. Grades 3+

Leslie says

When we first meet Mekhai (aka Bird), he is sitting on his bed, looking out his bedroom window and drawing. His work is pinned to the walls, a sketchpad is on his lap and he is rendering the scene: the bird, prominent, is soaring above the rooftops. My first thought, before I began author Zetta Elliott's artful narration, was that opening scene of Peter waking and peering out the window at a day and world of possibility in *The Snow Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. It is a morning, there is a dawning, and beyond that window is an idea. Even as Peter heads out into his urban landscape to pursue a day in a life we will all remember, Mekhai will do the same, but what is remembered is more than a day as Mekhai collects in memories, thoughts, and images the past, present, and future possibility. Keats uses bright hues, an open posture and a visage of anticipation; the gifted Shadra Strickland employs cooler tones of blue and a posture of quiet meditation, hand gripped around the pencil.

"I drew a picture so I wouldn't forget." Mekhai says (and not for the only time in the story).

The drawings hold memory, and I adore the way Bird demonstrates this with the ball cap. I neglected to mention the blue paisley on black cap sitting on the corner of the bed. I noticed it, especially as the scene is relatively spare (like the text), but it comes to mean more as the story progresses—just as the image of the bird becomes more—but the hat is a more subtle demonstration. Of course, the book bides its time providing it a greater meaning.

The publisher's comments above remark upon Bird's "quiet resilience," the book itself is a quiet one, which is not to imply it is heavy. Even as Elliott and Strickland render moments of sorrow, there are those full of delight. The loss of Granddad is buoyed by the presence of Uncle Son who tells him stories, plays him jazz records, and builds new memories in the smell and taste of sweet black coffee. Uncle Son tells him stories of those who've soared, "That other Bird—he's alright. But don't you waste your time trying to be like him. You just remember, everybody got their somethin'. And that includes you." These are words to carry as Bird remembers his brother Marcus—where they had the same interests, where paths diverge. Marcus stops drawing.

Elliott is fluid with time—flawless. Bird begins to talk about the slow and painful loss of Marcus and we

shift into the memory, experiencing it. Granddad is there, a steady arm. We come to grieve them both—for what was lost. But the memories are not anchored in anger or disappointment, and this makes a huge difference to how the story is weighted: the drawing of Mekhai's that closes the story is one of love and optimism.

Bird is not some insulting spoonful of sugar about a boy who experiences hardship and loss of two very important people in his life, but there is an anticipation of Bird's potential. He tapes his broken pencil back together. He does what he can. But the book is clear that there are situations and people with no easy fix, if any at all. Hard choices are made, consequences deeply felt. While a body could take Bird and make fliers about the evils of _____, Bird is the effective witness, the youthful eyes and voice that sees and speaks and tapes pencils in a move to heal what can be healed. And one of the many beauties of the book is how much Marcus is not demonized—he's mourned—he is still loved and part of Mekhai's consciousness (e.g. art/hat/rooftops).

There is an exchange about art: between graffiti art on the streets and the works hung in museums and to whom one belongs. It is a complex moment (one of many) in book that isn't going for simple, but thoughtful—and accessible. I can contemplate the ideas of temporality, of legacy and of erasure, but within the book I am compelled to hear the story Mekhai (Elliott) has to share. Bird is 'quietly resilient' in that it keeps moving forward. Indeed, since we open in a future looking back, Mekhai as we come to meet him is already moving forward. He didn't stop drawing. He doesn't have to forget in order to move forward, or fix everything. He is working at that somethin' everybody has.

"I like to draw. I'm not real good at it yet, but I try to practice every day. Uncle Son says that's how you get good at a thing—do it over and over until you can practically do it with your eyes closed.

For now I keep my eyes open 'cause I'm still learning how to get it right. It's kind of hard. Sometimes, the picture I draw on the page doesn't look like the real thing. Other times, the picture I draw looks even better than what I'm copying. That's what I like about drawing—you can fix stuff that's messed up just by using your imagination or rubbing your eraser over the page."

I mentioned the opening scene. Strickland conveys a great deal in that illustration, a lot of which is realized as the story is told. The overlaying/replacement of "Mekhai's illustrations" on the landscape, as the landscape, is lovely; his imagination at work in his envisioning of the world. I appreciate how, when we are introduced to Marcus, we see his face. From this page forward some part of it (if not its entirety) is concealed; until Mekhai draws it (vs the book's renderings). The perspectives, the presence of doors, windows, skylines, chains/bars, lighting...as with the easy way the text draws you in, the thoughtfully-crafted illustrations may prove to have a deceptive simplicity. Whether the reader is conscious of the crafting or no, Strickland and Elliott do not present a book about the power of art without demonstrating their own remarkable skill.

Needless to say, Bird is a must.

recommendations...Powell's has it marked ages 8-12. I would go younger and older. Elliott and Strickland make it accessible to the grade-school into middle- set, but the writing and conversation is there for older. For those who enjoy the urban landscape, and the arts; and deftly handled realism.

L (omphaloskepsis)

Jill says

This is one of the loveliest most affecting books for children I've seen in a long time. It is a fantastic book to help children deal with the loss of a loved one. It has garnered a long list of awards, including the Ezra Jack Keats Book Award, The Paterson Prize for Books for Young People, and ALA Notable Children's Book. The illustrator, Shadra Strickland, won the 2009 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent in Illustrations. Lee & Low recommends this book for children aged 8 and over.

Hajnal says

This book is also a 2009 Coretta Scott King winner and a John Steptoe award winner. Mekhai is nick-named "Bird" because he likes to draw birds and his Granddad thought he looked like a bird as a child. Some of the illustrations are Bird's drawings, while others are beautiful watercolor representations of his neighborhood. This story explores the complications in Bird's life—his brother is a drug addict and Granddad just died. Even though the book deals with the dark topics, Bird has many strong, supportive adults in his life to guide him along. And the issue of drug addiction is filtered through Bird's reality, who doesn't quite understand what's wrong with his brother. I recommend this book for readers in the middle grades.
