



The Bicycle Spy

Yona Zeldis McDonough

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Marcel loves riding his bicycle, whether he's racing through the streets of his small town in France or making bread deliveries for his parents' bakery. He dreams of someday competing in the Tour de France, the greatest bicycle race. But ever since Germany's occupation of France began two years ago, in 1940, the race has been canceled. Now there are soldiers everywhere, interrupting Marcel's rides with checkpoints and questioning.

Then Marcel learns two big secrets, and he realizes there are worse things about the war than a canceled race. When he later discovers that his friend's entire family is in imminent danger, Marcel knows he can help -- but it will involve taking a risky bicycle ride to pass along covert information. And when nothing ends up going according to plan, it's up to him to keep pedaling and think quickly... because his friend, her family, and his own future hang in the balance.

The Bicycle Spy Details

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Author : Yona Zeldis McDonough

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From Reader Review The Bicycle Spy for online ebook

Sheri says

I found The Bicycle Spy to be very relatable, readers will not only be able to identify with a friendship over a shared interest, but also with the emotions that the main characters experience. It is a good introduction to everyday life during WWII and as a bonus, a short history of the Tour de France is included also.

Riley Thomas says

1. The US President has learned that you've read this book and wants to know one thing a main character discovered about life that you think all Americans should know. What would you tell him? Why?

In 1942 Marcel is a young boy going through life during World War II. He is fascinated with the Tour de France and loves to ride his bike, "training" to someday race in the big event. He ends up using his bicycle skills by helping his parents fight/resist the Nazi's by delivering baked goods to other Nazi resisters. The secret, though, is that he is actually delivering secret messages back and forth inside of the breads and other goods. This way he won't get caught by soldiers. Marcel ends up meeting a young lady named Delphine and they strike up a friendship with their love of the Tour de France in common. Come to find out, Delphine and her family are Jewish, putting them at huge risk! Marcel tells his parents about the situation and they all agree to help her and her family. Delphine even asked Marcel at one point why he was helping her. Marcel replied that he simply had to because it was the right thing to do. I think that the most important thing that Marcel learns about life throughout this book is compassion. He learns that there is always someone out there who is worse off than you and when you can, you should help them. He learned the power of friendship and courage as well as he and his family stood up to Nazi soldiers and their injustice to the Jews.

Why I chose this assignment: I think that this prompt fit with the book very well. Given the circumstances, Marcel learns an enormous amount about himself and the world around him throughout the entire book. It was easy to have to think about the most important things he learned in his journey and compassion, friendship, and courage are all things that every American should have. The fact that this young, 12 year old boy was able to comprehend what was happening to Jewish families during WWII is fascinating and his character grew tremendously throughout his story. Referring to The Book Whisperer by Donalyn Miller, teachers could incorporate this prompt into a post-read activity for students to complete after they've finished reading the book. In order to keep track of what students are reading and check their progress, a teacher could give this prompt to students. On page 135, Donalyn Miller talks about how the entire goal of book reports is to make sure students are actually reading and retaining the information they're getting from books. Giving a prompt like the one above, or from the Alternatives to Book Reports list, students would technically still be doing a book report, but in a different, fun, and more engaging way. As a teacher, I would give this prompt to students along with instructions for length, and I would have the students write in letter form as if it was actually being sent to the president.

Dana says

Final selection for my classroom book clubs (6 in all for my first year) and this goes into the "favorite" pile! Set in a small French town during World War 2, Marcel helps his parents (who are part of the French Resistance) pass notes to other Resistance members, and in turn helps a friend escape to the safety of Spain. Great read!

Kate Willis says

I've loved everything I've read by this author, so when my sisters brought this home from the library (and I suddenly remembered it was on my TBR XD), I was excited to read it. ;)

This book covers a time period in history I knew next to nothing about, so frankly--I was geeking out. :D 1939 France in the "free zone". Also, the Tour de France? Why have I not heard of this?? :D :D

Because this was packed with fascinating history, it was a little slow in spots, but the author did a good job keeping the historical facts mostly to some pretty cool appendices in the back.

Marcel was a nice, relatable character. I liked his ordinary bravery and his courage to push himself for the sake of others. Also, three cheers for a great relationship with his parents! And their delivery system they had worked out was amazing. (Sidenote: I want some of that spice cake.)

Best quote: "Dark came quickly, along with a cold and stinging rain. The bike he had traded for was not as good as his old bike, so he had trouble maneuvering over some of the rougher patches. Still, Tour de France riders didn't stop for rain, and neither did he."

Altogether, this was an interesting story of bravery, determination, and compassion. I hope this author writes more soon. ;)

(And that COVER!! <3)

Amy says

Under 200 pages + male protagonist + vague cover = a book I am going to read with student-readers in mind.

ONCE is a huge Holocaust-themed success in my classroom for a variety of reasons: short chapters, brisk pacing, some hair-raising moments, but all in all satisfying and fairly innocent. THE BICYCLE SPY maintains the innocence of ONCE but doesn't have the pacing or the intensity that my readers tend to look for in their books. The main character Marcel's scrapes with danger are really only that - scrapes -- whereas my students are old enough that they tend to like a full body slam of intensity when it comes to danger.

ONCE has memorable if cookie-cutter characters here I felt the characters were not memorable or interesting, either.

What THE BICYCLE SPY does offer, on the other hand, is a decent exploration into the importance of bravery, courage, risk-taking, and even lying in the face of fighting evil.

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

It's November 1942, and Marcel Christophe, 12, has one dream - to ride in the famous bike race the Tour de France when he gets older. For now, though, he must be content with practicing on his bicycle, riding to school and delivering bread to customers of his parents' bakery. The race has been cancelled since the Nazis began occupying northern France in 1940, but Marcel knows it will be back after the war is over. Now, however, the Nazis have also invaded the southern part of France where Marcel lives, making things difficult for everyone. Not only are there shortages and rationing, but soldiers are stopping people to question where they are going and why.

The first time Marcel is stopped by a guard, his parents want to know all about it. The next time they ask him to deliver bread to his aunt and uncle. his mother gives him some pain d'epice (gingerbread) to offer to the guard if he is stopped again. Sure enough, the guard is there, and more than willing to let Marcel go by in exchange for the gingerbread. Afterwards, Marcel decides to slice off a little of the bread to eat and discovers a note written by his father baked into it. Suddenly, Marcel realizes he has been making a lot more bread deliveries these past few weeks, but why? Stunned, Marcel realizes his parents are in the resistance and his is delivering messages for them. Realizing the danger for everyone concerned, he decides to keep this to himself.

Meanwhile, at school, there is a new girl named Delphine Gilette who is not only a very good student, but knows all about the Tour de France thanks to her brother and father's interest in the race. It doesn't take long before she and Marcel become fast friends, riding their bikes together, playing together and doing homework. But just as Marcel has a secret, so does Delphine and when a boy in their class discovers a revealing photograph in her school satchel, her secret is exposed. Delphine and her family are Jews from northern France who had traveled to southern France using forged papers when it was still free of Nazis soldiers. Now, they will need new papers to try to get out of France to safely.

Marcel realizes he must confess to his parents that he knows that they are part of the resistance in order to help his friend escape France. Luckily, his parents are more than willing to help, but they must send Marcel to a fellow resistance contact on his bicycle. What should have been a simple trip, however, is anything but. Everything that could go wrong does, including a flat tire that forces Marcel to trade his beloved bike for a beat up replacement that will take him further from home than he has ever been seeking the right people who can help Delphine and her family get out of France.

But the Nazis have already begun rounding up all the Jews in the area. Will Marcel make it to his final destination and home again before Delphine and her parents are found and deported?

At first I thought The Bicycle Spy was not going to be a very interesting story, but that quickly changed and it proved to be a very accessible, exciting narrative of courage and friendship. The language is direct and clear, and terms that might be unfamiliar to readers are defined in the glossary at the back of the book. Told in the third person, Marcel's story unfolds simply and believably. I say believably because after reading so many stories about the courageous acts of children to help other, I can easily see how this could have happened.

As a protagonist, Marcel is a typical, unassuming 12 year old, who is happy riding his bike, racing his friends, and dreaming about his big Tour de France wins, yet he also seems surprised by his own bravery.

Delphine, a girl who has had to move around because of the Nazis, feels a little more down to earth but the reader will definitely feel her underlying anxiety, even when she appears to be so confident.

I really liked the way Yona Zeldis McDonough managed to keep the tension building slowly right up to the end of the novel, making it a deceptively simple, thought provoking story. I also like the way she incorporated information about the Nazi occupation of France, WWII and even the Tour de France so easily that it felt like a natural part of the narrative, and not like she was teaching her readers a lesson.

McDonough has also included a short history of WWII, as well as a Timeline, a short history of the Tour de France (something I found very interesting since all I know about this race has to do with the disgraced Lance Armstrong) and books for further reading.

There is much in The Bicycle Spy that will appeal to young readers and for that reason, I highly recommend it to them.

This book is recommended for readers age 8+

This book was sent to me by the publisher, Scholastic Press

This review was originally posted on The Children's War

Liam Rogers says

I thought it was a pretty good book, very short and my only complaint is the ending. The ending feels like the book was hastily finished. I feel like good books always has an ending that leaves you satisfied and kinda thinking.

Bobby says

This was a great book at school and at home. It kept me on the edge of my seat guessing and guessing some more what will happen to this boy who loves the Tour de France and can never put his bike down. He meets up with a girl who had a secret identity and they have two things in common no. One they both love bikes and number two they hate the nazis. Delphine Gillette the girl knows that she's being hunted and Marcel does too. One day Marcel finds out that his parents are in the French resistance, and Marcel knows he can do something to help her. So he tells his parents about Delphine and the parents know where to go: through the mountains into Spain. That won't be easy and Marcel knows that, so he tries all he can to hide the fact that she's a Jew.

blackplume says

Full review posted on my blog, Blackplume

Set in France during World War II, The Bicycle Spy tells the story of a 12-year-old Marcel Christophe. Marcel is a good biker and he dreams of entering the Tour de France someday. But with the German ruling his country his dream suddenly becomes impossible. The race has been canceled indefinitely, Nazis are

everywhere, soldiers are guarding every streets and they no longer feel safe in their own place. And It become more complicated when he found out that his parents are part of the Resistance and his new friend, Delphine Gilette and her family are in danger for being a Jewish. What a young boy can do against the Nazi soldiers? Can he save his friend before the Gestapo get hold of her and her family?

Marcel as the protagonist is very brave. Though his train of thought sometimes sounds too mature for his age I still find him and his situation believable. His friendships with Delphine is sweet and his relationship with his parents is endearing.

Continue reading here

Anastasia Tuckness says

Marcel, who lives in southern France in 1942, loves riding his bicycle and dreams of someday racing in the Tour de France. Unfortunately, the race has been cancelled the last few years because of World War II. Otherwise, his small town seems mostly unaffected by the war, up until two events change Marcel's life quite drastically. First, his parents (who own a bakery) start asking him to deliver bread on his bicycle, and these deliveries often seem sort of strange--until Marcel figures out that each loaf contains a secret message for other members of the French Resistance. These bicycle trips then take on new urgency, importance, and danger, as he must pass soldier checkpoints each time. Second, a new girl joins his class, and after a while, Marcel begins to suspect there is something different about her family. Could she be Jewish? If so, what would that mean for their growing friendship--after all, finally he's met a girl who loves biking and is super smart, which makes her a great friend.

Marcel has lots of hard decisions to make and hard roads to follow after he makes these decisions! This book would make a good family read-aloud as well as a great book for any readers who like history or gripping stories. I will admit it starts a little slow, so readers may need to give it a little time.

Brooke says

Twelve-year-old Marcel loves the tour-de-France. Unfortunately it is during World War II and the race has been suspended. Still Marcel delivers packages for his Mother- loaves of bread from their bakery, racing his bike around his French town and countryside at full speed, imagining it is him in the race. One day he is so hungry he breaks open a loaf before delivering it to his aunt. Inside he finds a message that seems to be in some sort of code. Could his parents be part of the French Resistance? then Marcel meets a new girl who also likes to race bikes. But things just don't add up about her and soon Marcel finds himself racing to help save his new friend. Marcel is the only one who can help his friend and her family find safety. Is he brave enough? Is he strong enough or will he fail? Loved this historical fiction.

Woff says

Pretty tame, but probably a good way to introduce younger readers (pre-middle grade) to WWII - especially those who aren't ready for the really harrowing stuff.

Sadie Forsythe says

Now, this is written for 3rd to 7th graders, according to the info page in the front of the book. So, I'm hardly the target demographic, being almost 40 and all. But I want to give it to my 9yo and be able to discuss it with her, so I went ahead and read it too. The writing is appropriately simple and it trims some very thick themes into fairly thin ideas, such that a child can grasp it.

I do think it shies away from really engaging the subject matter. Because of this I think they'd need a little knowledge of WWII to really understand it. A lot is explained, but I still feel a minimal base knowledge would be needed or at least appreciated. But Marcel is a sweet character and his story is interesting enough, though again fairly simplistic. I think a 3rd to 7th grader would likely enjoy the book. I'm hoping mine will, especially given the state of the world at this moment.

Ms. Yingling says

E ARC from Edelweiss Above the Treeline

Marcel's parents run a bakery, so it's not unusual for them to ask him to deliver bread. He loves to ride his bike, and is a big fan of the Tour de France, so he often imagines that he is riding in it while on his errands. Because it is 1942 and the Nazis have invaded France, there has been no race, and there are lots of shortages and rationing. His mother is able to bake pan d'épice (gingerbread) for him to give to German guards when he is out delivering, and he soon finds out why-- his parents are members of the Resistance, and he is delivering messages for them! At school, he makes a friend in new student Delphine, who is also a fan of the Tour de France, and the two spend a lot of time together, playing cards, studying, and riding bikes. When Delphine confides in Marcel that she is Jewish and her family has been trying to escape the Nazis, he takes her very seriously. Eventually, a mean classmate finds out, and her family is on the run again. Marcel's parents have connections that could help the family get to Spain, and Marcel's skills as a bicycle spy might be the only thing standing between his friend and her family's demise.

Strengths: This was a well-constructed and engaging middle grade novel about a topic which still fascinates readers. Marcel's involvement was realistically portrayed, and exciting to read. Tying in his interest to professional bike racing was inspired. Good length, attractive cover, and a great friendship between Marcel and Delphine make this a historical fiction title that will be easy to get children to read.

Weaknesses: There were a couple of uses of "mom" and "kid" that seemed out of place, although I know the words were in use then. Small quibble.

What I really think: Our 8th grade studies the Holocaust, and this will be a fantastic book to add to my collection for those classes. It also reads well on its own because of the adventure and the interest in bike riding.

Charlie says

Won this well-written book from Goodreads.com.

As a member of the older generation, I got a pleasure reading this kids book. It would have helped me to understand WW11 (a bit better) if I had read it during my much younger days. The WW11 kids in Europe

were at war too. This story about the bicycle spy is one of them. Great story.
