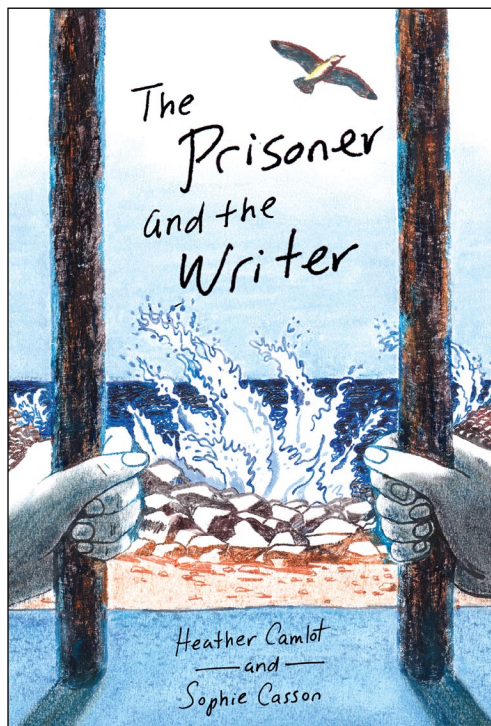




GROUNDWOOD STUDY GUIDES

The Prisoner and the Writer

*Written by Heather Camlot
Illustrated by Sophie Casson*



An illustrated, middle-grade treatment of the Dreyfus Affair
told from the perspectives of Jewish army captain
Alfred Dreyfus and writer Emile Zola.

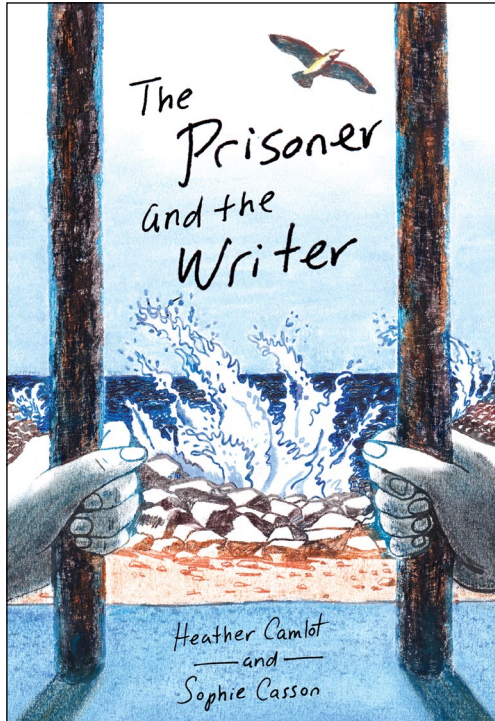
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Ages 9 to 12 / Grades 4 to 7

JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Prejudice & Racism / Historical

6 x 8.875 / 64 pages

Hardcover / \$14.99 / 978-1-77306-632-5 / ebook 978-1-77306-633-2



BOOK DESCRIPTION

In 1895 a prisoner watches the ocean through the bars of his cell. Accused of betraying France, Captain Alfred Dreyfus is exiled to a prison on Devil’s Island, far from his wife and children. It’s a horrible fate — but what if he’s innocent?

Seven thousand miles away, the famous writer Emile Zola wonders: Is Alfred a traitor to France? Or a victim of antisemitism? Convinced that Alfred is innocent, Emile knows that it is his DUTY to help. He pens the famous letter “J’Accuse ...!”, explaining that Alfred was blamed, charged, tried and convicted ... only because he is Jewish.

This powerful middle-grade story written in verse with full-page illustrations is told from the perspectives of both Alfred Dreyfus and Emile Zola, two men whose courage changed the world. The true story, published in time for the 125th anniversary of “J’Accuse ...!”, acts as a reminder that a person committed to truth, justice and equality must stand up and speak out against prejudice for themselves — and for others. Includes an author’s note and further historical context.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

TITLE ANALYSIS

Just by looking at the title, what do you think this book will be about? Why might a prisoner and a writer be connected? Where and when do you think this story takes place?

HISTORICAL NONFICTION

The Prisoner and the Writer is about a historical event, the Dreyfus Affair, that began in 1894. Ask students the following questions, and as a class write down key ideas or words on the board or a piece of paper:

- What does historical nonfiction mean?
 - “Historical nonfiction consists of true accounts of historical eras and events.” ([Masterclass](#))
- Why is it important to read historical stories today?
- What do these stories tell us about the past?
- What do they tell us about the present and inform how we participate in our communities? (Note: Revisit this question after reading.)

UNDERSTANDING THE WORKING DEFINITION OF ANTISEMITISM

Explain to students that in this story they will be reading about a historical account of antisemitism, and that antisemitism still occurs today. Gauge what your students know about antisemitism through a KWL Chart: What I **K**now, What I **W**ant to Know, What I **L**earned (revisit ‘What I Learned’ after reading the story).

Some students may not be familiar with the word antisemitism, and there are many working definitions of the term. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance shares their working definition:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

If appropriate for your class, share this definition (in whole or parts) with students.

It's also important that students understand who Jewish people are outside of antisemitism. Consider exploring this [slideshow](#) (slides 8-18) for your own learning and/or student learning before or after reading.

BYSTANDER VS. UPSTANDER

- Ask students: What is a bystander? What is an upstander? Hear from students and teachers on what they have to say by showing this [video](#) (until 0:58).
- Think, Pair, Share: Ask students to take two to three minutes and write in their journal using the following prompt: Think of a time when you were either a bystander or an upstander. Describe the time if you are comfortable doing so. What did you feel at that moment? In pairs, students will share what they wrote. Then open up the conversation to the full class and have a few students share what they discussed with their partners.

LEARNING MORE ABOUT ALFRED DREYFUS

If it will be helpful for students to have additional context about Alfred Dreyfus and the Dreyfus Affair, consider exploring and reading through this [informative landing page](#) via the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

DURING READING ACTIVITIES

DEFINING AND DISCUSSING

Some words and phrases in the book may be unfamiliar to students. Take a moment to pause and define the following words and phrases to deepen student understanding:

- [Bordereau](#) — the torn pieces of handwritten letters allegedly written by Captain Dreyfus in 1894 (page 25).
 - Cross-curricular idea for History/French class: explore this document as a primary source. The document can be accessed in French and English.
- [Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité](#) — the national motto of France that first appeared during the French Revolution (page 33). The English translation is “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.
- [J’Accuse](#) — a French term that means “I accuse!”. Emile Zola’s open letter titled “J’Accuse ...!” accused the French military of framing Alfred Dreyfus for a crime he did not commit and for a miscarriage of justice (page 33).

Discuss the following phrase: “One suspect, the only Jewish officer in the French army high command” (page 22).

- Have you ever been the only person with your identity in a room or community?
- How do you think Alfred Dreyfus would have felt as the only Jewish person in his level at work?
- What might that say about the French army and French society at the time?

CHALLENGES AND IMPACTS OF BEING AN UPSTANDER (TWO OPTIONS):

Option One (Sitting)

After reading page 26, pause and ask: Why is it so significant that Emile Zola wants to help and get involved? Why do you think he cares about helping Alfred Dreyfus?

a) On the board or a piece of paper, create a chart with two columns. For column one, write “Benefits of getting involved/standing up,” and for column two, write “Challenges of getting involved/standing up.”

b) Fill out the chart as a class. When you are done populating students’ responses, ask them: With all of this in mind, what is the right decision for Emile Zola in your opinion?

Option Two (Standing Up and Moving)

a) Pause reading after page 26, while Emile Zola is still contemplating what to do. Before you continue reading, set up four pieces of paper in the corners of the room (Corner One: Strongly Agree, Corner Two: Agree, Corner Three: Disagree, Corner Four: Strongly Disagree).

b) Read through the following phrases and have students walk to the corner that they agree with. Ask one student at each corner to share why they chose to stand there.

- It is Emile’s responsibility to help Alfred -OR- Emile should help Alfred.
- It is important that Emile’s name is on “J’Accuse ...!” because of his prominent place in society.
- Standing up for what is right often comes with a price -OR- Standing up for what is right often comes with difficulties.
- It is easier to stand up and help when there are more people around. (Once completing this prompt you can tell students that psychologists have actually found that when more people are around you are less likely to intervene and help.)

Quote Analysis

“When we bury the truth underground, it builds up, it takes on such an explosive force, that, the day it bursts, it blows up everything with it” (page 30).

- What is this quote saying about the truth?
- Can you think about a time when this happened?

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Revisit your KWL Chart and/or the words generated from the pre-reading activities and add to what is already there with the following prompts: How did this story help us understand the importance of learning history? How does learning history help us understand the present and help us make this world a better and more just place?

Write a letter from the perspective of Emile Zola to Captain Alfred Dreyfus explaining why you felt compelled to write “J’Accuse...!” In the voice of Emile Zola, why were you willing to sacrifice your career, reputation and life to stand up for Alfred Dreyfus? What do you want Alfred to know about what you were thinking, feeling and experiencing during this time?

Create an [identity chart](#) for Emile Zola to better understand what it takes to be an upstander. Include things that are referenced in the story such as location, age, career, and also adjectives that describe him based on what we know about him.

Create a class-wide Mentimeter [Word Cloud](#). Students should pick the three top words that they would use to describe Zola and submit them through the Mentimeter website. Watch as all of the words populate to create a Word Cloud (the more times a word is submitted, the larger it will become)! Commit as a class to prioritizing these important traits at school and in the community.

Being an Upstander: Throughout history, many people have stood up to injustice and done the right thing. What are some other examples of upstanders like Emile Zola, and how can students be upstanders in their community? Have students explore the [Canadian Human Rights ‘Be an Upstander’ Website](#) independently or as a class to reflect on how they can be an upstander, and read through case studies of other upstanders.

After they have explored the website (20-30 minutes) have students share with the class or reflect in a private journal:

- How did reading *The Prisoner and the Writer* help you reflect on the way you want to be an upstander?
- What did you learn about yourself through this activity? What did you learn about the world through this activity?
- Students can share with the class how they want to be an upstander and/or one commitment they will make to be an upstander.

VISUAL AND ARTISTIC OPTIONS:

Option One: Reflecting on and Responding to the Author's Note

Reading an author's note can give us insight into an author's identity, hopes and passions. Before reading the author's note, have a discussion with students based on the following questions:

- Who do you imagine the author might be?
- Why do you think it was important for them to share this story with students?

Read the author's note as a class and create [Found Poems](#) for a gallery walk:

- Step 1: Read the author's note as a class and compile a list of words and phrases on the board or a piece of paper that resonate with the class to create a Found Poem.
- Step 2: Identify a theme or message that represents the words and phrases. Begin the conversation by asking students: What do these words/phrases represent?
- Step 3: Using the words compiled as a class and adding their own words, students are to create a poem that responds to the author's note. What do they want the author to know about the themes, messages and impacts of the book?

For younger grades, ask students to choose one to two lines that they resonate most with and then continue to Step 4-6.

- Step 4: Once the poems are complete, each student will receive a blank cue card or small piece of paper. They will write out their good copy poem/lines and include a visual representation of their message.
- Step 5: Put up all of the poems/pieces of art on the wall for a gallery walk and have students view their classmates' art.
- Step 6: Debrief the process of creation and the gallery walk. How did this experience feel for them? How did it feel to respond to the author? Why is it important to respond? How did it feel seeing other students' poems/art?

Option Two: Sketch to Stretch

Re-read the last page of the book (page 55) out loud to the class, or have students read in pairs, groups or to themselves. Then ask students to visualize a response to the question: *What is the most valuable idea in what we just read?* Have them represent their answer in a visual, incorporating words, phrases, and/or quotations into their drawing. Then in the pair, group, and/or whole class discussion that follows, have students explain their choices, going back to the text to support their thinking.

Option Three: Script Writing and Mini-Performances

In 1899, Alfred Dreyfus receives “the most important message of his life” and finds out that he will be released from prison and go home (page 49). In groups of three to four, students will create a script that outlines a conversation between Dreyfus and Zola once Dreyfus returns home. What do you imagine they will want to say to one another? How might Dreyfus want to thank Zola? What might Zola want to explain about what happened? When groups finish writing their scripts, they will perform their script for the class in a mini performance.

AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR BIOGRAPHIES



HEATHER CAMLOT is the author of the nonfiction *What If Soldiers Fought with Pillows?* and the Skipping Stones Honor Award novels *The Other Side* and *Clutch*, the latter of which was named among *Kirkus's* Best Middle-Grade Historical Fiction. A journalist for more than 20 years, she has written, edited and translated for various publications, including *Quill & Quire*, *Owl*, *TV Guide Canada* and *Style at Home*. She lives in Toronto, Ontario.



SOPHIE CASSON has illustrated *The Artist and Me* by Shane Peacock, a finalist for the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, *Quelle pagaille!* by Danielle Marcotte and Laurence-Aurélié Thérroux-Marcotte, a finalist for the Governor General's Award, and *Helen's Birds* by Sara Cassidy. Her highly acclaimed illustrations are inspired by Japanese woodblock prints and World War II-era posters. Sophie's award-winning work has also appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Nature*, as well as in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Sophie lives in Montreal, Quebec.