

D is for Democracy: A Citizens Alphabet

Elissa Grodin

Victor Juhasz, Illustrator

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The picture-book design of this primer belies the depth of its information and vocabulary about democracy and America's famous citizens and leaders. In fact, middle- and high-schoolers struggling with homework might want to keep a copy handy for reference. That way, they-and their parents-can brush up on the history of the Mint, for example, and remember that it is a part of the United States Treasury, which also oversees the Internal Revenue Service, Secret Service, and Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

Encountering the rhyme for each letter, readers will build vocabulary as they learn that "Z is for Zeitgeist." There is no need for panicky parents to race for a dictionary, however, as the author includes sidebars that explain the concepts and terms. "Zeitgeist is a German word," Grodin explains, "translating as time spirit, meaning the feeling or spirit of a certain period of time."

The choices of terms that correspond with alphabet letters are a fertile mix of ideas as well as the personalities who have shaped history. The marvelous, humorous caricatures seem aimed at older readers. "W is for George Washington" salutes all American presidents. The illustration that accompanies this verse is a sly depiction of the famous scene of Washington crossing the Delaware. Washington's boat is crowded with heads of other presidents, among them Lincoln, FDR, Truman, Reagan, and Clinton.

Grodin is also the author of *N is for Nutmeg: A Connecticut Alphabet*, and has written for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman*. Here, she provides a thought-provoking action guide that suggests ways to feed the brain, such as reading newspapers, watching news, getting involved with government, and becoming volunteers. Grodin also describes empowering examples of how youngsters have made a difference in their communities. While the author envisions the book for use by all ages, the material is very advanced for young children, although the book's format (11 by 10 inches) suggests that it is not designed for older readers or adults, either. Its target audience is not readily clear.

The illustrator is a graduate of Parsons School of Design. His caricatures and illustrations have appeared in publications such as the *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. His colorful art enlivens the history lessons that fill this primer. Importantly, the book challenges readers to participate in democracy and to take citizenship seriously. Citizens should be informed, ask questions, and vote. Readers will understand that D is also for Doing the democratic process.

LINDA SALISBURY (August 18, 2009)

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