



The Faithful Spy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Plot to Kill Hitler

John Hendrix

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Interweaving handwritten text and art, John Hendrix tells the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his fight against the oppression of the German people during World War II. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was shocked to watch the German church embrace Hitler's agenda of hatred. He spoke out against the Nazi party and led a breakaway church that rebelled against racist and nationalist beliefs of the Third Reich. Struggling with how his faith interacted with his ethics, Bonhoeffer eventually became convinced that Hitler and the Nazi Party needed to be stopped--and he was willing to sacrifice anything and everything to do so.

The Faithful Spy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Plot to Kill Hitler Details

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From Reader Review The Faithful Spy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Plot to Kill Hitler for online ebook

Rachel Libke says

This graphic novel is incredible. The author did an amazing job succinctly laying out Bonhoeffer's moral struggles and faith alongside the actions that sprang from those convictions. The book achieves a focused and clear narrative despite conveying a complex amount of information (for such a short book) on both Hitler's rise and Bonhoeffer's life and the radically opposed philosophies that motivated the two men. The text and art support each other so well; I especially loved the visual metaphors throughout this stunning book.

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

In its starred review, Kirkus calls *The Faithful Spy* an audacious graphic biography and it certainly is that. But then again, it is about a man whose whole being centered around theology and his own religious beliefs at a time when these beliefs were about to be sorely tested. Illustrated in bold teal, red, and black against black, white, teal or red backgrounds, this is equally a story about Adolf Hitler's seizure of power and of the rise of the German resistance.

Twins Sabine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were born in Berlin, Germany 1906, second to last children in a large Lutheran family, one drawn more to science than theology. Dietrich, however, developed an interest in theology early in life, but felt that something was missing from the church he loved so much. He realized that something was causing it to feel static, to feel like just an academic exercise, and after a trip to Rome, he began struggling to discover how he could change that and make the church dynamic.

In 1930, Dietrich left Germany to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. There he met Frank Fisher, an African American and Jean Lasserre, a Frenchman. When Fisher took him to the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where a surprised Bonhoeffer saw the energy of the people at worship, heard them encouraged to act against the world's injustices, and to put their faith in God in opposition to the world's evils by their pastor, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell. From Lasserre, Bonhoeffer learned that the church should be independent of the state, and should exist to help and serve the people, not to tell them what to do. After a year in NYC, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, shortly before Hitler seized power.

Hendrix parallels Bonhoeffer's changing ideas about the church with Hitler's rise to power. Both have compelling stories that are made all the more interesting because they are such polar opposites. But, there is no lesson to be learned from Hitler's story, and everything to be gained from Bonhoeffer's. And Hendrix makes it a point to focus on Bonhoeffer's faith and his developing belief that the church required the faithful to act against injustice. Bonhoeffer joined the resistance, where he was able to serve as a double agent, reporting to Hitler's Reich and at the same time, gathering information for the resistance. When the plot to assassinate Hitler finally became a reality, Bonhoeffer faced his greatest struggle between behaving morally as his religion ordained or acting against those moral principles by taking a life. He found his answer in Martin Luther who believed that if you are going to sin, to sin boldly.

Using only a three color graphic design, Hendrix has created a dynamic format with which to tell Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story. This is not a panel by panel work, but one that incorporates a variety of layouts, nor is it a

strict biography, there's plenty of text and allegorical illustrations used throughout to emphasize or illustrate a particular point.

The text is handwritten, and small, and affords plenty of information to be included on each page. There are some maps, and the allegorical illustrations have the feel of a good political cartoon. The whole book has the feel of old comic books from that time period, which somehow gives it a nice sense of authenticity. I wondered if this would make it more or less attractive to kids given how glitzy comics are today. Hopefully, the excellent visuals and compelling subject matter will pull them in. What I found most interesting is its relevance for today's world.

Be sure to read Hendrix' Authors Note at the back of the book, along with the other informative back matter.

The Faithful Spy is a book that will have such widespread appeal to readers, artists, comic book lovers, historical scholars, and everyone else and I can't recommend it more.

This book is recommended for readers age 10+

This book was purchased for my personal library

Betsy says

In this life, it can be difficult to find absolutes. Absolute good. Absolute evil. Absolute good in the face of absolute evil. For many of us, the world can be a gray and murky place, where the sheer complexity of each individual human does away with those archaic, grandiose declarations of what is and is not "sinful".

And then there's Hitler.

Boy, you just couldn't have designed a better baddie if you tried. Not a shred of a redeeming quality clings to his form. Thanks to him, WWII really did become that old-fashioned reckoning between bad and good that WWI had failed to encompass. Still, even when you have people fighting Nazis, there's complexity under the surface. Years ago I remember reading an article, possibly in the New Yorker, possibly a book review, that discussed the culpability of the Germans under Hitler's power. Surely they weren't all bad, were they? Or were they? Did they swallow his rampant nationalism with glee or was it force-fed? And what does it feel like to live in a world where the very ground beneath your feet feels like it's slipping away from under you? Where every single human being living under a mad dictator must wrestle with his or her own conscience regularly? Their own soul? This would be heavy material for a book for adults, but for author/illustrator John Hendrix that challenge could not be enough. He had to make it comprehensible to a 5th grader. I know from working in children's rooms for years that kids have a fascination with WWII. Some of that comes from the comfort of knowing America was on the side of good (a reassurance we need increasingly these days), but some of it may also be a fascination with what it took out of individuals like the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer to fight the Nazi tide. I won't lie to you. This book is chock full of Christianity with a capital "C". Yet regardless of your denomination, or lack thereof, it's the combination of history, personal fear, moral implications determining the greater good, and old-fashioned Hitler assassination attempts (can't forget those) that turn this heavily illustrated title from mere historical piece to downright master-piece. Kids, you ain't never read anything like this puppy before. And I'll warrant you won't ever again.

He was born in 1906, in Germany, to a large, loving family of brainiacs. But in the midst of scientist siblings,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt an overwhelming calling to the Christian faith. You could say he was a born theologian, and maybe he could have had an uneventful life of Christian fellowship had WWI not gotten in the way. From his broken nation, Dietrich traveled. He made a pilgrimage to Rome, and then a very different one to Harlem. He saw prejudice, great faith, and the power of community, and when he returned to Germany he was determined to put what he had learned into action. Little could he know that Adolf Hitler's rise was on the horizon. When confronted with the dictator, Heinrich did everything he could to aid the resistance. Through his words and his deeds, author/illustrator John Hendrix heavily illustrates a gripping history that grapples with mighty questions about personal faith and what happens when following your beliefs puts you in the greatest danger of your life.

A biographer gives form and function to a human life. A children's biographer must then additionally frame that form in a story with heroes, villains and, ultimately, some kind of lesson to be learned. The people we commend as the greatest of heroes are those that lend themselves to grand, eloquent storytelling. This is familiar territory for children's book biographies. *The Faithful Spy*, however, isn't content to stay in familiar territory. No doubt you will hear people argue about its age range. They will say that the book should never have been marketed to children and that due to the complexity of the ideas inside, to say nothing of the presence of Hitler himself, this should be purchased only for young adult collections. But to say that denies that children and middle schoolers are capable of reading, comprehending, and processing moral complexity. Let's put it another way. Few historical works for children will proffer the idea that all German Christians during WWII weren't dyed-in-the-wool Nazis. In an era when nationalism is on the rise in countries across the globe, it is a great good to teach kids about a time when blind and displaced loyalty to a country led to unspeakable evil. Hendrix doesn't have to spell out the parallels to the times in which we live. Have faith in the kids. They're going to be able to get there on their own. The author is just laying the facts out before them. He trusts their intelligence. We, the adults, would be wise to do the same.

Now for the good news. We live in one of the most exciting times to read nonfiction for kids in American history. I say this because not only are we seeing a significant upsurge in fabulous nonfiction books for kids, increasing every year, but we're seeing a simultaneous surge in discussions by gatekeepers and professionals on what is and is not a good idea when critiquing these books. Making up facts to support a story? Bad. Making up facts to support a story and then confessing to it in the endpapers? Less bad, but annoying. Fake dialogue? Bad. Fake dialogue that makes it very clear which lines are made up and which are real? Less bad, but potentially confusing. Fake dialogue in cartoon speech bubbles, while the real quotes have asterisks to avoid any and all confusion? Untried until now. Why? Because there's a new kind of book for children out there that hasn't yet been the subject of sufficient discussion. You see, while there may be more quality nonfiction for kids being published today than ever, there aren't that many nonfiction *comics* for kids (Nathan Hale's Hazardous Tales, notwithstanding). What few that there are, however, have made for an interesting set of alternative rules when it comes to dialogue. Here's how it falls out:

- We acknowledge that any nonfiction book for kids that is illustrated is automatically incorporating fictional elements because no illustration, short of one based on a photograph (and even those were often staged), is "real". It relies on the artist's imagination to come to life.
- Furthermore, we understand that comics and graphic novels are, by their nature, heavily reliant on illustration.
- Therefore, when fake dialogue is incorporated into a comic strip on a page, it becomes part of the illustration itself. And since we've already established that all readers understand that illustrations are inherently fictional, by extension any words that appear in those illustrations would have to be considered fictional too. The author/illustrator isn't leading the reader astray, then, because the reader is aware that

direct quotations on a page found within distinct quotations marks are to be judged differently than speech bubbles in a sequential art sequence.

By the way, I just made all of that up, but it sounds right to me. There's more than a hint of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* lurking in those rules, but Scott published his book long before the massive rise of the illustrated nonfiction book for older child readers. None of us could have predicted a need for this kind of clarification. Hendrix, for his part, is crystal clear about what is and is not true in his dialogue. On page 8 he even creates a two-panel spread of 4-year-old Dietrich asking his mother two theological questions. One panel has no asterisk and the other one does. Below, Hendrix notes that "Texts marked with an asterisk denote direct quotations from original sources. Dialogue or spoken words without an asterisk should be read as speculative." There is no chance, then, of confusion when reading the more comic book-like parts of history. And, as I have mentioned, even without this clarification I'd say he was on solid ground since I consider comics art and art is, inherently, both fictional and unavoidable in illustrated nonfiction works for kids.

But let's stop a moment and talk about Hendrix's art. How do you describe it, really? The man cultivates a style that I've been struggling to categorize for years. Were I better acquainted with the history of design I might be able to put it into words. I mean, with its heavy reliance on typography (far more than any other American children's illustrator I've ever encountered) you could say that Hendrix is a ribald combination of Joe Sacco, 1920s Soviet art, and P.T. Bridgeport. Hendrix would probably add influences like Josh Cochran and Al Parker, but while I see where he's coming from, his style is entirely his own. How he brings this style to bear on a work of nonfiction is particularly interesting when you consider that even five years ago I doubt he could have gotten this book published in this form. Neither fish nor fowl, it isn't a graphic novel nor a straight block of text. Its intermingling of image and words is a uniquely 21st century creation of a post-Brian Selznick era. And what art it is. It's not just the typography, beautiful though that might be. Look at the way he draws you close then casts you at a distance, looking down on the action from above. Look at the plethora of maps, graphs, and comic panels. Look at how he renders Dietrich, making the reflection on the man's lenses obscure his eyes. Why does Hendrix do this? Scott McCloud once pointed out that when you simplify a drawn character, the process of that simplification makes the character more relatable to the reader. When you can't see Dietrich's eyes you can ascribe any thought you want to his frame. Notice too that the glasses appear when he's coming to America, where his eyes will be opened in a different sense. It all comes together.

I mentioned earlier that a lot of kids have a great and abiding affection for WWII, the easiest of the relatively recent wars to comprehend. WWI, in contrast, is a mess that I may still not fully understand to this day. Fortunately, comics have come to provide an ideal method for parsing out complex historical ideas. Take Nathan Hale's *Treaties, Trenches, Mud, and Blood*. That was an entire book where WWI's participants were reduced to animals and critters (bulldogs are England, cocks are France, bunnies are America, etc.) and it worked. Hendrix in *The Faithful Spy* finds himself with a different problem. He cannot explain Hitler's rise without delving into WWI and its aftermath. But explaining the WHOLE war would bog down the story. This isn't supposed to be a treatise on the Kaiser, after all. It's about Bonhoeffer! So what to do? The solution Hendrix hits on is to reduce WWI to a single two-page spread with mixed results. Certainly, he is able to create something visual that hints at the horrors of the time and the toll it took on the German people. To do this, though, he must cram a lot in. Tiny text, a sidebar that explains the cost of inflation between 1921 to November 1923, a mention of the end of the Monarchy, sanctions, defeat, and the Treaty of Versailles . . . it's a lot to take it. Maybe too much. May as well just hand them the Hale book at that point. The important thing is to know that it happened.

Undoubtedly the Christianity in the book is going to catch some folks by surprise. Never mind the word

Faithful in the title. Never mind the cross floating there in the dead, smack center of the cover. They're going to be surprised. Hendrix is Christian himself, and I suspect only he could have brought Dietrich's works to life. After all, the book covers an amazing array of information about its subject's beliefs. There is Dietrich's early decision that the true church of God would have to be a revolutionary body. His understand that "a real faith demanded action or it was no faith at all." And, most important of all, the central theological question of whether or not God would forgive the murderer of a tyrant. "Are there moments in history when ethical people must take extreme actions, even if those are against their moral code?" The fact of the matter is that the central idea at the heart of Bonhoeffer's life is this question: What the duty of a single Christian, of an average human, in the face of overwhelming evil?

In his Author's Note at the end, Hendrix says that one point of this book was to show how a Hitler can rise. "Despite the lessons learned from the horrors of World War II, recent history has shown humanity has not been permanently vaccinated against tyrants. We never will be . . . The line between national decency and a descent into fear and hatred is, and always will be, razor thin." Now we live in a country where our children are facing their own tyrants and making their own hard choices. Do I walk out or remain? Stand or take a knee? Like it or not, many Americans bear much in common with Dietrich. The days when those on the more privileged side of the spectrum could blissfully float about without noticing the state of the world around them are gone. Someone once pointed out that when you raise a generation on books like *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, you shouldn't be too surprised when the children rise up against the tyrants. Our children have been told for years whom they should emulate. Finally, they're being given a hero that equated faith and love with action and sacrifice.

The time for more of those heroes is now.

For ages 10 and up.

orangerful says

Do you ever read a book that makes you think you need to go back and redo all of your GoodReads rating because this is the new standard for 5 stars?

Hendrix starts the book off with a start white page with black text, paragraphs lined up in a row. In just these few words, he gets the reader thinking about Germany, WWII, a people vs the people and history. And then you turn the page and are sucked into a world of color - of peaceful, contemplative blues and angry, offensive reds. We learn about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's early life, his obsession with theology and how his coming of age ran parallel to the Germany's struggles after WWI and the rise of Adolf Hitler.

This book is the next step for Nathan Hale fans, the ones who might need a little more deep thought in their history books. Hendrix explains the roots of the war and how a country can get sucked into evil leadership. And how there will always be people fighting back, risking their lives to save the soul of their nation. Bonhoeffer was just one of those people, but it is important to tell his story, a life of balancing religion and faith and trying to be a good man and dealing with his countries atrocities and the fact that murdering a man might be the only way to save the world.

I really hope Hendrix does more history titles like this. His approach to the story made it very readable and it was hard to put down. Fantastic.

Naomi Bates says

What a beautiful graphic biographical narrative novel! Hendrix chronicles history on many different levels, from personal, to through the lens of both conspirators and their enemy, the Nazis. The graphics help the reader understand the complexities of the assassination attempts and even battlefields through linear narrative and graphics combined.

I had to have my iPad next to me at all times to go search for more information on people, places, files and even word origins (ie Gestapo). KUDOS to Hendrix for not only writing AND drawing the graphics, but also the many many hours of research put into his novel that teens can relate to and make history come alive.

Cynthia Egbert says

Well, I never thought I would find myself giving a graphic novel a four star rating but this one was powerful enough to cause me to run to the bookstore and get my own copy. I have a decent working knowledge of Bonhoeffer and this one really was true to the facts without giving into some of the myths that have been perpetuated over the years concerning the man. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is fine just as he is and doesn't need any embellishment. The nice surprise I found with this book was the fabulous way that the author gave you a clear and concise picture on how Hitler was able to come to power. For that alone, it is worth having as part of a family library. I recommend this one highly.

Jamie says

This book! I've been trying to figure out what to say about The Faithful Spy since I finished it. It's an exceptional piece of work. A graphic novel(but not) that tells the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer(and others) and his part in the plot to kill Hitler. It also gives you a clear picture on how Hitler came to power. The artwork itself sucks you right in and never feels overwhelming. If you are a history fan, an art fan, or someone who wants to read about a person who made choices for the greater good against such evil read this book! It is beautifully written, engaging, and a reminder of what good can do. Since closing the book I have so many thoughts still going through my head. Have a box of tissues nearby. My 14-year-old and 11-year-old will be reading this book.

Barb Middleton says

Succeeds in showing how a person like Hitler can rise to power. Well done. Beautiful illustrations.

Brian says

This is one of my favorites. Everything about this book was perfect, the characters to the plot. Highly recommend it to anyone.

Hannah Flowers says

Wow. I did not expect to love this graphic novel as much as I did. To start with, this book is beautiful. Drop-dead gorgeous! The illustrations are incredible and the color scheme is eye-catching and visually stunning. The written content is well written for the age group (Juvie) and focuses not so much on the nitty gritty details of Bonhoeffer's life but the overarching themes of loving "the other" and living a life of integrity even when that means certain death. I can't recommend this book enough! I've got to go buy it now. :)

Nikki says

Wowza. If you ever come across an adult who has decided that graphic novels are not 'real' reading (THEY ARE.), give them this. Hendrix masterfully uses the format to tell the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, using panels, maps, and infographics to provide the reader with background knowledge on his religious beliefs, the history of how Hitler came into power, and the military strategies of the Germany army. This book will be a challenging read for kids/teenagers, but the format will help them understand trickier parts of the story and the pacing will keep them engaged.

Molly Dettmann says

A really interesting story told in an eye-catching way. With a mix of mediums (artwork, comic panels, illustrations) it made for a fast-paced follow along. I do think the size of the lettering was hard to read at times which makes me give it a 3 instead of a 4.

Tara says

I'm happy to own a copy of this beautiful, meaningful book by award-winning illustrator John Hendrix. So much work went into this, from the pens used to illustrate to the font developed specifically from Hendrix's own handwriting. The topic is timely as it reduces to an accessible level the rise to power of Hitler and how most of Germany allowed for his ascendancy. But mostly, it's a touching tribute to Bonhoeffer, one of the few who stepped up out of conscience and love of his god. This is my first graphic novel. Luckily Hendrix's prose matches the quality of the drawings!

Adam Shields says

Short Review: I have read a lot on Bonhoeffer previously. So I was not coming into the book blind. I think this was a good overview and it avoided a lot of pitfalls around Bonhoeffer. I do think that it hinted at too large a role for Bonhoeffer in a couple places where Bonhoeffer was a more peripheral figure, but for the most part the history is good.

I also liked the art, as with any graphic novel plays a very important role.

Honestly, I think this is probably the best presentation about how Hitler rose to power of any of the book on Bonhoeffer that I have read. There is a lot of misinformation there and many of the Bonhoeffer books do not spend a lot of time on the German context around Bonhoeffer. This book spent at least a third of the space giving context to Bonhoeffer, which I think was very helpful.

My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/faithful-spy/>

Chazley says

I loved this so much that I can't find the words. I want the whole world to read it. I want to keep it by my bedside for the rest of my life. Bonhoeffer is an amazing man, and his words and his story are as important now as they ever were.
