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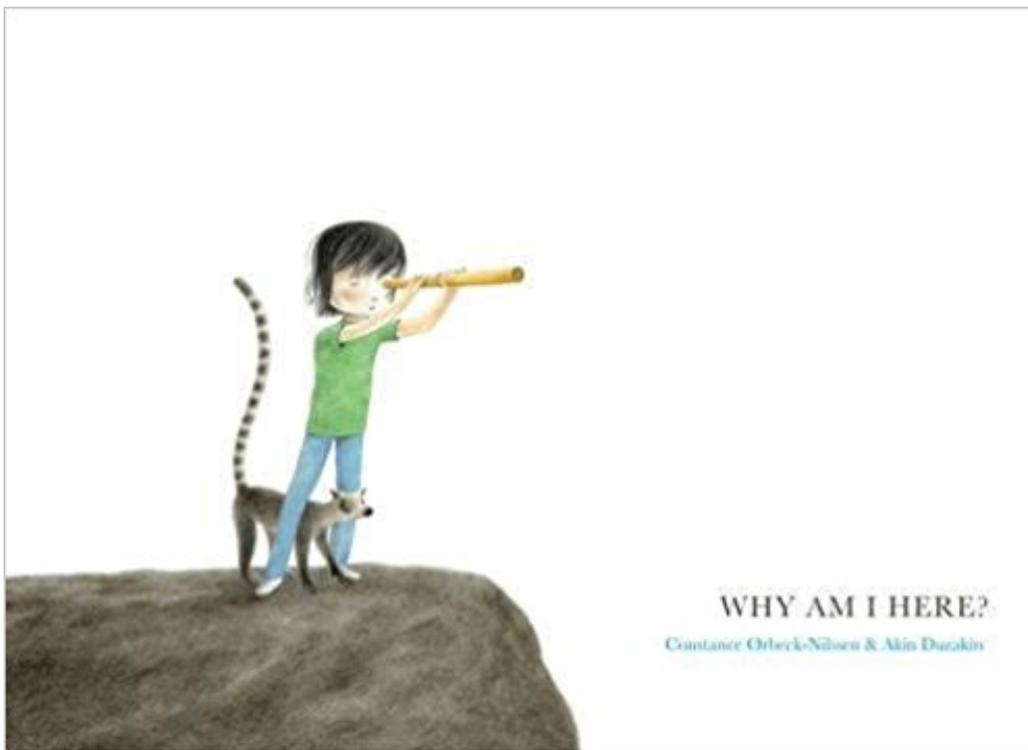
Review of *Why am I here?*

By Constance Ørbeck-Nilssen and Illustrated by Akin Duzakin

Adult/Educator Reviewer: Katie McKay

The Heart of Texas Writing Project at The University of Texas, Austin, TX

Student Review: Maya McKay, Pre-Kindergarten



Ørbeck-Nilssen, C. (2016). *Why am I here?*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.

ISBN: 978-0802854773

Adult Review: Katie McKay

Why am I here? Is a picture book that challenges young readers to think about big ideas like how our life circumstances compare to those of others in the world, especially those experiencing peril or extreme hardship and uncertainty due to war, famine, or homelessness. The main character is a

child with white skin and is likely from a Western country. The diverse people whose lives and circumstances the child considers appear to be from Asian, African, or Middle Eastern cultures or of people in poverty—perspectives that are often underrepresented and marginalized in media and society. The main character ponders such questions as, *What if I were somewhere else? What if there were a war going on where I lived? Or, What if I lived in a place where I had to work all day long?* These questions lead the reader to imply that the central character’s experience is that of privilege and relative comfort. In the closing pages the narrator poses broader questions like, *“Why am I here?”* And, *“Isn’t that just the way it is?”*

For parents interested in broaching sometimes hard-to-talk-about topics such as privilege, discrimination, and war-torn or oppressive

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social contexts, this text may offer opportunities to ask tough questions and introduce tough ideas. However, this book risks perpetuating feelings of disconnection and distance from pain, suffering, and hardship. It also risks leaving the reader with a feeling of permanence and lack of agency to contribute to positive change.

The white narrator is illustrated up close and in detail, while other people in the illustrations, about whom the narrator wonders, are flat—mostly drawn merely as tiny silhouettes at a distance and out of reach. In even the more detailed illustrations, the reader can scarcely make out the expressions and faces of the people about whom the narrator asks, “What would it be like to live like that?” If teachers and parents aim to encourage young readers to consider diverse perspectives and to strengthen connections and empathy, they would be better off purchasing books that describe the personal experiences of and help readers to connect with people of different perspectives. If teachers and parents want young readers to feel empowered to contribute to change, they should seek books in which the characters have agency. If teachers and parents hope to advance disadvantaged voices, they should choose books in which the disadvantaged *have* faces and voices.



Student Review: Maya McKay

When I read this book I wondered:
Why are the people running away?
Why aren't they being strong and
fighting back? What are their names? What do
their faces look like? Where are their homes?
Were they destroyed? Why doesn't the girl
help?

