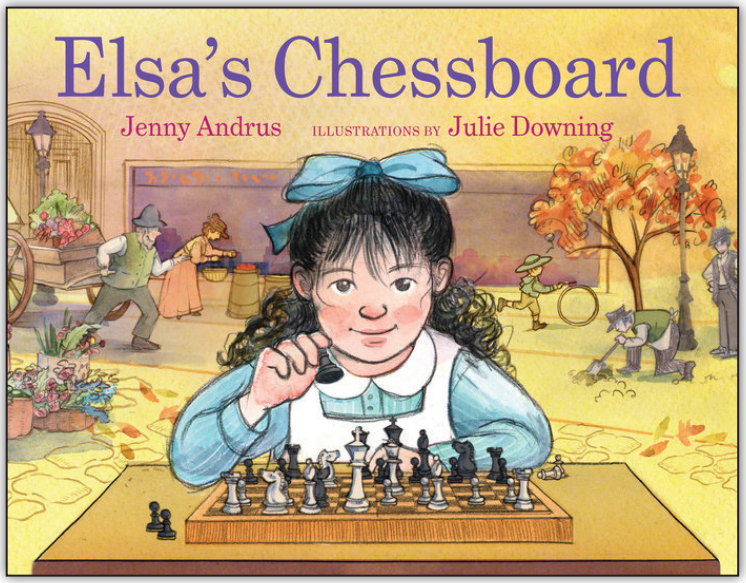
Grades
Pre K–3

HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Elsa's Chessboard

by **Jenny Andrus**
illustrated by **Julie Downing**

★ **"[A] heartfelt narrative."**
—*The Horn Book* (starred review)

HC: 9780823454082 · Ebook: 9780823462254

Instructional Reading Standards:
R.L. 3.1: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
R.L. 3.7: Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).

Instructional Social Studies Standards:
CCSS R.L. 4.9: Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the topic knowledgeably.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elsa carries her chessboard everywhere, always ready for a game. When World War II forces her from Europe, can chess help make America home?

Growing up in 1900s Vienna, Elsa's brothers are always playing chess. "No girls!" they tell her when she first asks to learn; but she wears them down, and soon she's such a pro that they give her a special chess set of her own.

Elsa plays chess whenever she can. When she grows up, she even meets her husband over games in the park. But when World War II grips Europe, the young Jewish family must emigrate to America, where they find themselves surrounded by unfamiliar languages. Luckily, Elsa knows one language that can always bring people together: chess!

In the wake of COVID lockdowns and the hit show *The Queen's Gambit*, millions of Americans are falling in love with chess, and young people are no exception. Based on the life of author Jenny Andrus's grandmother, *Elsa's Chessboard* is a gripping tale of resilience, human connection, and the boundless potential of women in male-dominated fields.

READ ALOUD AND DISCUSS

After reading the book aloud to students, ask the following questions:

- Why did Elsa bring her chessboard with her from Austria to the United States?
- Besides her chessboard, what other special items did Elsa bring and why? (Hint: There are at least two more. Look closely at the illustrations to find them all.)
- How did each of these items help Elsa adapt to life in the United States?

ART ACTIVITY

Imagine you had to move far away from family and friends and could only bring one large suitcase.

- After packing clothes and essential items, you have room left for three special items. Which ones would you choose?
- Draw each special item and explain why it is important to you.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

In smaller groups, either have students pick or assign them a picture book from the reading list below, or choose any other book where a central character brought something special with them when they immigrated.

- Read Aloud and Discuss: What do these items mean to the characters? How did they help them in their new homes? How are they the same or different from the items that Elsa brought?
    - In their discussion, students will discover that what the main character brings can be an actual item (e.g., candlesticks, a button, a letter), a skill (e.g., sewing, piano), or something less tangible, often relating to where they were born (e.g., a name, a memory, a language, a tradition).
    - Have each small group share their thoughts with the whole class.
- Ask your librarian to have books available for students who wish to check them out afterward.
- Bonus Question: If you moved or immigrated to a new country, did you pack any special items to remind you of home? What were they? You may ask the same questions of a grandparent, other relative, or neighbor who has immigrated.

"They Only Brought What Mattered Most" Select Reading List

Fictional and biographical picture books about immigrants and refugees who bring something special with them. It might be an actual item, a skill or tradition, or a memory carried in their hearts.

***Elsa's Chessboard* by Jenny Andrus, illustrated by Julie Downing**

Elsa brings her chessboard everywhere. During World War II, the chess whiz flees to SF, a city of strangers speaking unfamiliar languages. Luckily, Elsa's chessboard has a way of bringing people together.

***Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales**
An immigrant mom and her young son discover the perfect place to learn to read, write, and make their voices heard: the public library! In this love letter to picture books, the illustrations evoke the traditions and memories that the mom brings with her from Mexico.

***Five Stories* by Ellen Weinstein**
Over many decades, five immigrant children from around the world move into the same apartment building on the Lower East Side. The special items and traditions they each bring contribute to a neighborhood rich in tastes, sounds, and stories.

***Watercress* by Andrea Wang, illustrated by Jason Chin**
A young girl is embarrassed to search for wild-growing watercress with her immigrant parents. She wants to buy her food at a store like other kids. It's only when her mother shares memories of growing up in China that her feelings begin to change.

FOR THE FULL READING LIST, CHECK OUT:
https://jennyandruswrites.com/resources/

Guide created by Jenny Andrus with appreciation to librarian Melissa McAvoy.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Photo Credit: Suzanne Grady

Jenny Andrus is an author, children's book reviewer, and school librarian. She has written stories for newspapers and magazines and coauthored *Bay Area Baby*, a resource book for parents. For fourteen years, she was the librarian at Live Oak School in San Francisco, where her favorite part of the job was sharing picture books with kids. Learn more at JennyAndrusWrites.com.

Photo Credit: Lorenz Angelo

Julie Downing is the author of *Hello, Sun*, *Hello, Moon*, and *Night in the City*. She has illustrated over forty-five picture books, including *Cubs in the Tub* by Candace Fleming, *The Firekeeper's Son* by Linda Sue Park, and *Tessa Takes Wing* by Richard Jackson. She has won many awards, including a Parents' Choice Award, the New York Public Library's Best Books Award, APAAL Best Illustrated Book and the Irma Black Silver Medal. Her work has been featured in the SCBWI Original Art Show. She lives in San Francisco. Visit JulieDowning.com for more information.