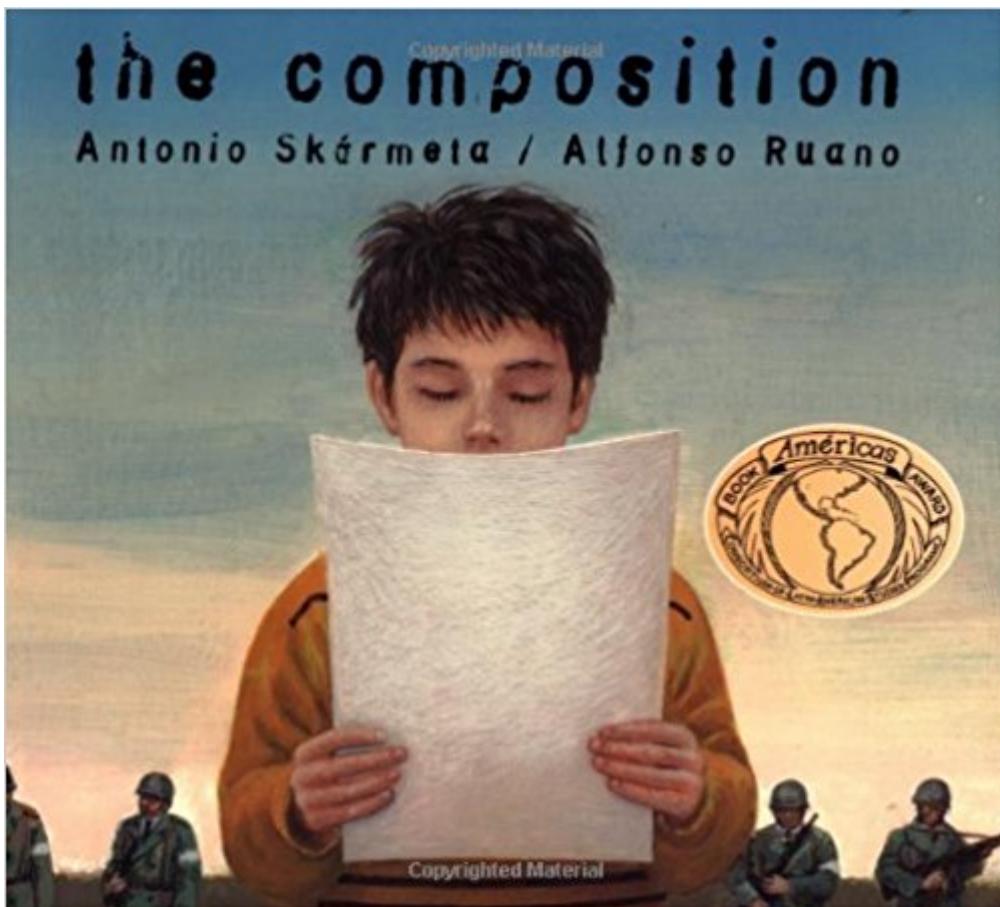


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# The Composition



## **Synopsis**

Pedro is a nine-year-old boy whose main interest in life is playing soccer. The arrest of his friend Daniel's father and a visit to the school of an army captain who wants the children to write a composition entitled "What My Family Does at Night" suddenly force Pedro to make a difficult choice. The author's note explains what a dictatorship is and provides a context for this powerful and provocative story.

## **Book Information**

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Age Range: 8 and up

Grade Level: 3 and up

## **Customer Reviews**

Grade 2-6-Children living under an unspecified dictatorship watch as one of their fathers is taken away by soldiers. The next day, a military officer visits their classroom and tells them they must each enter a composition-writing contest about "What My Family Does at Night." Although the adults have tried to shield the youngsters from the dangers of their political situation, several of them know that their parents are opposed to the government and that their sentiments, associations, and conversations are perilous to divulge. What can they safely say? Sk rmeta leaves readers in suspense while he writes of the mundane occurrences of a week: an old tree falls down, the price of ice cream goes up, etc. Finally, the Captain returns to the classroom with the compositions, each of

which has been read and commented upon. It is only on the last page that readers learn what the protagonist has written. Pedro's innocuous and blatantly false assertions that his parents play chess every night shows how clearly he has put together the pieces of his parents' resistance and the necessity for secrecy. Sk rmeta's concise and pointed description of Pedro's acquisition of political consciousness and discretion is brilliant. As a provocative incentive to discussion of different forms of government or the importance of freedom of assembly and discretion, this story is unique.

Ruano's emotionally charged paintings depict a multicultural society in which people hold themselves rigidly in control in public situations. Miriam Lang Budin, Chappaqua Public Library, NY  
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The pressure on children to betray their own parents is the terror in this picture book for older children, originally published in Spanish in Venezuela, and set in a police state somewhere in Latin America in the recent past. The story is quietly told through the experience of one boy, Pedro, who sees his soccer buddy's father arrested by the police. At night Pedro's parents huddle around the radio for news, and he knows that they are against the dictatorship. Then a policeman comes into his classroom and asks the kids to write a composition about what their families do at home at night. With realistic local details of school, home, and neighborhood, words and pictures stay true to the child's viewpoint, whether Pedro is playing ball, whispering to his friend in class, or watching the police with their guns. The edgy illustrations by Ruano Alfonso show the tension in daily life, in a place where family intimacy can be invaded by the government through brute force and sly deception. A long final note explains what it's like to live under a dictatorship. Hazel  
Rochman  
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I know, I know. Comparing this phenomenal picture book to the classic movie, "Jaws," seems like a bit of stretch. But stay with me for a minute. This summer, I introduced my kids to "Jaws" and appreciated just how well-made the movie really was. Part of what makes the movie so effective is that you rarely see the shark. The shark appears only when it is absolutely necessary. All other times, you're left with this great building tension as you watch shark destruction and the fearful faces of victims. It's the same with this book. Aside from being elegantly written and illustrated (no small task), what makes this book so good is how well dictatorship is presented. Much like the great white, you never see the dictator, but always feel his presence. And it was really a stroke of genius to have

the dictator make his presence known in their third grade class. As a classroom teacher, I am grateful that I stumbled on this wonderful little book. There are so many possible lessons to do with it. I can present it to show how powerful the written word can be. I can use it to introduce democracy. I can even start my lesson by asking the kids to write an essay that may seem to have ulterior motives and, once the conversation is generated, move right into the book. The list goes on and on. It's a great read and can definitely be used as an effective classroom tool. Chris Bowen Author of *Our Kids: Building Relationships in the Classroom*

Love!

I used this as a read aloud with my 6th graders. They struggle with government systems and I liked this story as another way to approach dictatorship without tying it to a specific point in time. My students really got into the story. We had some great discussions in response to the story. And it lends itself to writing assignments/assessment.

Great book for kids between 8 years-old and 10 years-old kids

Understanding the various types of government can be confusing or boring. I have used this book for many years with 4th and 5th graders as an introduction to Dictatorships. The balance of humor, tension, and sentimentality within the context of a school-boy's life makes the story very engaging and accessible.

People Pedro knows are being taken away by the government. It's a scary time. Then a general comes to Pedro's school and announces a contest for the best composition. The theme? What My Family Does at Night. This little picture book shines. It could have easily been a diatribe against dictatorships but the author makes his point without lecturing. And, in the process, he shares little moments in the lives of families during this scary time. Here's a little bit from the story, with Pedro talking to his friend about the essay. "What are you going to write?" he (Pedro) asked. "Anything," said Juan. "How about you?" "I don't know," said Pedro. "What did your parents do yesterday?" asked Juan. "Same as usual. They came home, they are, they listened to the radio, they

went to bed. "Just like my mother." My mother started crying, said Pedro. "Mothers are always crying," said Juan. "I hardly ever cry," said Pedro. "I haven't cried for a year." "What about if I hit you and you get a black eye. Would you cry then?" asked Juan. "Why would you do that when you're my friend?" said Pedro. "That's true. I wouldn't," answered Juan.

At first glance, "The Composition" is a book that simply describes military dictatorships in a way that children will understand. On a closer look, however, Antonio Skarmeta's brilliant 2000 creation does more than that. It shows how every human being, regardless of age, can fight injustice on an individual level. It displays sympathetic characters that are punished for thinking for themselves. And it is one of the first picture books I've ever read where the main character is a child that outsmarts a fascist regime. Pedro lives in an unnamed South American country with his mother and father. Each day after work his parents sit on the sofa to listen to foreign radio stations about their country's military dictatorship. Pedro doesn't really understand the importance of this, preferring to play soccer with his friends. One day, while playing, he sees the father of one of his friends being led away by a group of soldiers. That night Pedro finds that his own parents, like Daniel's, are against their country's form of government. When he asks if he himself is against the dictatorship his mother replies, "Children aren't against anything. Children are just children". The next day a military man enters Pedro's classroom with an assignment. They are to write a composition under the soldier's watchful eye entitled, "What my family does at night". Pedro thinks it through and after talking with his friend Juan proceeds to write. In the end, the reader discovers that sometimes children are far cannier than the adults around them might suspect. In many ways the real question this story raises is whether or not children have the ability to make careful informed decisions. On the outset, Pedro's mother thinks this isn't possible. She believes that kids are innocent and incapable of deep thought. When Pedro tells Juan this, his friend's response is, "They all say that. They took my father away up north". So you see, when a child is affected personally by the events around him/her, that child cannot help but come to their own conclusions. What Pedro writes in the end is a clever tale of how his parents usually come home and, after dinner, play chess. The last line of the book (after Pedro has read this composition to his parents) is this: "Well", said his father, "we'd better buy a chess set". Fabulous writing. Would you expect anything less from the author that

wrote the novel on which the film "Il Postino" was based? I loved the plot of this book and, in a way, I wished that the illustrations matched it. The pictures here are fine, of course. They accurately portray the ways in which kids feel the effects of life in a strictly controlled country. Illustrator Alfonso Ruano also isn't afraid to focus his attention on the seemingly innocuous elements of a tale. When the children are told the subject of their composition, the picture on the facing page is of an eraser that has had a small hole drilled into it. Two pages later you see Pedro grasping the edge of his desk as he attempts to try to figure out what to write. Behind him looms the soldier, arms clasped behind his back. Another artist might have chosen to make the tale a little more artistically rendered, but Ruano has done pretty well with this book. The result is that your attention is focused entirely on the story itself. Tackling freedom and personal choice in a picture book is very hard work. Very hard. In the case of "The Composition" it's pulled off brilliantly. A creative amalgamation of text, subtext, and darn good writing this book is appropriate for any and every kid. If you'd like a book that is politically charged but subtle too, I think "The Composition" is a brilliant choice.

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