

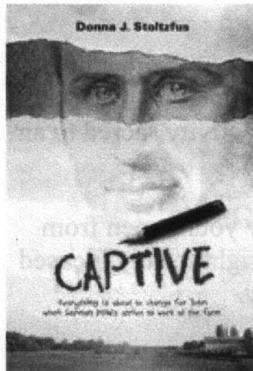
Mennonite World Review

Book review: *Captive*

An enemy prisoner on the farm

Jun 10, 2019 by [Rolando Santiago](#)

Captive is a coming-of-age novel about friendship and self-discovery in the context of war, pacifism and the little-known story of German prisoners of war in the United States during World War II.



Captive

About 425,000 German and Italian POWs were held in more than 500 camps across the United States. Some were interned at Fort Indiantown Gap and at the Reading airport in Pennsylvania. They provided valuable labor to farms in the surrounding region, including Lancaster County, where this story takes place.

Set in the summer of 1944, some of the novel's most vivid scenes were inspired by author Donna J. Stoltzfus' own family history: Her grandfather managed the tomato cannery at a Mennonite farm where POWs worked.

The main character, John Witmer, is a 13-year-old with a gift for drawing. John draws what he sees, and he sees a lot of unusual activity at Mennonite Elam Miller's farm, where he works as a farmhand alongside a handful of German prisoners of war.

John's world begins to shift as he draws scenes on the farm — a POW who rescues him from a mysterious fire, another POW standing suspiciously along the edge of a cornfield. His drawing of Dorothy, Elam's youngest daughter, ends up in the hands of Hans, a POW, creating tension between John's determination to see the POWs as enemies and his hunger to talk about art.

Dorothy dug the drawing out of her pocket. "Look." She held out the paper to Hans. "John drew this. It's of me."

Hans studied the sketch for several seconds.

"It's not finished," John said, and looked away, rolling his eyes. What a stupid thing to say. Why should he care what the POW thought of his sketch? John ran his fingers through his hair. He wanted to snatch the drawing back. It was too personal — a drawing of Dorothy, his work, in the hands of this German.

"I could tell this was you, even if you hadn't told me." Hans handed the drawing back to Dorothy. "It's good." He looked at John as he said this. "Very good."

As John tries to make sense of his experiences on the farm, he faces conflict at home when his father, Ted, returns from the battlefields of Europe with a serious injury. Embittered by the war, he clashes with John for befriending German POWs. One of John's many challenges is figuring out how to navigate relationships while staying true to himself.

"... I can't stand it" [said Ted]. "Can't stand the thought of you working next to them, of you drawing them, making friends with them. Maybe that soldier is better than some. But it's too soon."

"I understand, Pop, but you sit around here reading history books. Books on war. I'm just doing what those authors did! I'm just recording history. Marking it down as it happens. Just with drawings, not words. I'm not saying it's good or bad — I'm not making judgments!"

The author shows how interpersonal conflict, which might lead to violence, can be resolved through peacebuilding strategies that are credible and creative.

In a climactic scene, tension is diffused by the simple gesture of offering Ted a glass of water. At another point, Elam asks Hans to use his calligraphy skills to record names in the family Bible. In a time defined by war, who would have imagined that a German prisoner of war would be asked to apply his skill in an activity sacred to an American Mennonite family?

The author refers to the Civilian Public Service experience, which touched the lives of many young men from historic peace churches during the war, but it is not a central point in the novel. Stoltzfus is right to stay focused on the German POW experience, especially because this story has nearly been lost to history.

Yet I cannot let go of my awareness of the CPS story. It had a great impact on my life growing up in Puerto Rico. My father told me many stories of the CPSers who ran community health programs in the La Plata valley, where my father grew up. These stories still hold a grip on my understanding about intercultural peacebuilding practices, which in many ways were similar to the peacebuilding practices that John experienced with the German POWs.

In the late 1940s, seasonal migrants from Puerto Rico served on the same tomato fields as the POWs in Lancaster County. How would this other invisible story be understood today?

I recommend *Captive* for its layered storytelling, relatable dialogue, historic authenticity and peacebuilding narrative. Labeled a middle-grade novel, it is an intriguing read for adults as well.

Stoltzfus grew up in New York City but often visited Lancaster County, where she had extended family of both Mennonite and Amish heritage. She earned a bachelor's degree from Goshen (Ind.) College and a master's degree from New York University. She and her husband have raised their three children in Lancaster County.

Rolando Santiago is director of development at Jubilee Association of Maryland. He is former executive director of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. and Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society. He enjoys writing about Mennonite history in Puerto Rico, memories of growing up in Puerto Rico and faith-based organizations involved in global public health.