

# AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



## John McCutcheon on *Flowers for Sarajevo*

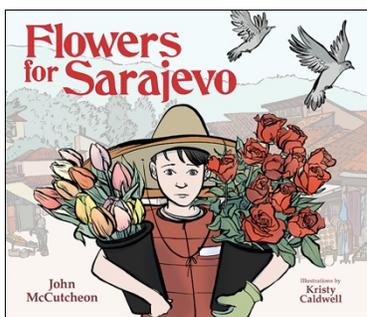
HC & CD: 978-1-56145-943-8 | CD: 978-1-68263-000-6

Young Drasko is happy working with his father in the Sarajevo market. Then war encroaches and Drasko must run the family flower stand alone. One morning, the bakery is bombed and twenty-two people are killed. The next day, a cellist walks to the bombsite and plays the most heartbreaking music Drasko can imagine. The cellist returns for twenty-two days, one day for each victim of the bombing. Inspired by the musician's response, Drasko finds a way to help make Sarajevo beautiful again.

Based on the real events of the Bosnian War, award-winning songwriter and storyteller John McCutcheon brings this uplifting story to life with the included CD in which McCutcheon discusses the inspiration for his original song and the subsequent picture book about the power of beauty in the face of violence and suffering.

**Q:** *Flowers for Sarajevo* is inspired by cellist Vedran Smailovic's vigils during the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992. But you chose to focus your book not on Smailovic, but on a fictional boy who sold flowers with his father in the square. Tell us more about this unique perspective.

**A:** Well, I chose this perspective for two reasons: one, because this is a book aimed at young readers, at children and their families, and I wanted to give them an opportunity to invest in the story, to imagine that they're there. But more importantly, children today grow up learning about the heroes of our cultures. They hear about Jackie Robinson, and they hear about Nelson Mandela, and they hear about Rosa Parks and Gandhi and Martin Luther King and these people become so iconic that they almost immobilize us. We can't imagine



being that person, having that kind of courage to stand up and act when it seems no one else might. But each of us has an opportunity to respond to that kind of action, and that's really the perspective I wanted to take with this book.

**Q:** The Siege of Sarajevo happened 25 years ago, halfway around the world. How do you feel it is relevant today?

Why is it important for families, parents, and children to learn about this particular episode in history?

**A:** This is not the lone incident in which someone did something extraordinary that we all have an opportunity to respond to. Today, as we speak, in this period in time, we have a civil war going on in Syria. We have things that require our response as citizens of a global community, whether it be technology, free trade, whatever. We are connected in ways that we've never been connected before, and we find ourselves moved by these things. We have lots to learn, and this story is one of the ways we learn how to respond in a world in which we read about terror every day. We can choose to reward acts of terror with our fear, or we can learn from the example of Vedran Smailovic, who braved snipers and bombings in a war-torn street to overcome that fear and respond with an act of beauty and solidarity.

**Q:** You met with Vedran Smailovic in Ireland to record your joint musical effort. You are both accomplished artists. What was it like to meet Vedran? Was it easy to fall into a friendship and musical collaboration with him?

**A:** We met at a hotel, in the pub there, and he roared up in his great motorcycle. He's a great rider, all hair and mustache and leather, and came in, and it was as though we had known one another forever. A few days later, he showed up at a session I was doing at a pub that some of my friends own. And it was there at the pub owners' home that I sang for him for the first time "Streets of Sarajevo," and invited him to play the cello on it, which he agreed to do. Which was a great honor for me. We have had and have a lot of common ground, both as musicians and composers, but also as people who think that music is more than cotton candy for the ears, that it is something that, in our own lives, has moved us and changed us and directed us.

**Q:** You've written and published hundreds of songs, and you've also published poetry. The text of songs and picture books is not unlike poetry, in that it relies on an economy of words, a rhythmic intensity of language. Your three picture books have all derived from original songs. How does your approach to writing songs differ from your poetry or your picture book texts?

**A:** Well the obvious difference is that there are more moving parts in a song than there are in a piece of poetry or in the text for a picture book. There's the music, there's the instrumental accompaniment, there's how you use your voice, but they all rely on the distillation of language, of saying a lot with a little.

**Q:** What is it about music that makes it a language we all understand?

**A:** In this case, of course, it was instrumental. It was not confined by any language or dialect or obvious tradition. The piece he played, Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor, is a very interesting piece of music. It survived the fire-bombing of Dresden in the Saxon State Library after World War II, and from what we know today, if you went and heard a concert of Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor, it would not actually be what Vedran played, because it was an incomplete piece of music. But Vedran wisely, brilliantly, chose to play this unfinished version of it. And, I think the fact that it had the invitation for people to imprint on it their own meaning—and it's a heartbreaking piece of music—but I think the unfinished quality of it, the question it asked by the fact that it just stops at one point, is important. It doesn't tie everything up in a nice neat bow, and that was what I thought was part of the brilliance of choosing this particular piece.

\*\*Edited for length and clarity. Full interview is available on the audio CD accompanying the book.\*\*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John McCutcheon is highly regarded as a singer, songwriter, master musician, legendary performer, and producer. His thirty-eight albums have garnered six Grammy nominations. He is also the author of the award-winning picture book *Christmas in the Trenches*; his original song, on which the book is based, was recently named one of the 100 Essential Folksongs by Folk Alley. He lives in Georgia.

[www.folkmusic.com](http://www.folkmusic.com)

## REVIEWS

★ "Beauty will always find a way to rise from violence, but this is a reminder all readers need."  
—*Kirkus Reviews*, **STARRED REVIEW**

★ "Text and illustrations work together to remind readers of the power of beauty in the face of human suffering.... A highly recommended book that highlights the capacity for empathy and humanity, even in a society faced with violence and war."  
—*School Library Journal*, **STARRED REVIEW**

"Moving... A bittersweet account of the power of art in dark times." —*Booklist*

"[A] powerful story of a musical performance that defied the horror of combat." —*Publishers Weekly*

"*Flowers for Sarajevo* provides an insightful response, combining history, humanity and music in a memorable picture book that's perfect for young elementary school students." —*BookPage*

## AWARDS

- Parents' Choice Gold Award —Parents' Choice Foundation, 2017
- ABC Best Books for Young Readers —American Booksellers Association, 2017

  
**P E A C H T R E E**  
P U B L I S H E R S

phone 404-876-8761 • 800-241-0113

fax 404-875-2578 • 800-875-8909

[www.peachtree-online.com](http://www.peachtree-online.com)

updated 10/30/17