

Activism, Empathy, and Virtue Signaling in Eugene Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose*

Eugene Yelchin's 2012 Newbery Honor Award book *Breaking Stalin's Nose* is set during the Great Terror or Great Purge that occurred in Stalinist Russia between 1936 and 1938. Yelchin's protagonist is ten-year-old Sasha Zaichik, son of a member of Stalin's State Security or secret police. Sasha's dream since as far back as he can remember is to wear the red scarf of the Young Pioneers, an outward sign, or in contemporary terms a virtue-signal, that he is a devoted Communist. But the night before Sasha is to become a member of the Young Pioneers, his father is arrested as an enemy of the state. Very quickly Sasha is forced to choose between the increasingly untenable options of denouncing his father and others or of abandoning his dream to become a Young Pioneer. Sasha's world becomes increasingly unstable and surreal, and he realizes that neither option guarantees anything and that choice itself is only an illusion.

In studying Sasha's dilemma, and those of two of his classmates, I draw on Kirsi Paulina Kallio's (2012) discussion of the institutional and the everyday as arenas for children and youth to enact political agency through either a politics of voice or a politics of noise. When Sasha and his classmates are both offered and denied institutional voice, they find ways to exert individual agency, and Sasha discovers that sometimes the loudest noise is silence.

Kallio, K. P. (2012). Political presence and the politics of noise. *Space and Polity*, 16(3), 287-302.