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Town is by the Sea

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This is one of those slow burn picture books, the impact of which lingers long after its covers have been closed. It takes readers to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, to the coalmining days of Cape Breton when many men spent their days toiling in mines beneath the sea.

Our young narrator is a boy, the son of a miner, and as the book opens his father is leaving his grassy hilltop home for work. The lad wakes and begins to reveal the details of his day's activities, and the routine life of his father. He uses the repeated 'it goes like this' phrase, which imbues the whole narrative with a timelessness.

The boy's world is expansive, outdoors - the grassy playground, the town shops, the graveyard where his grandfather is buried, the wide seascape. That of his father is dark and confined. 'And deep down under that sea, my father is digging for coal.' This repeat refrain provides a stark contrast between the two worlds and adds a subtle air of poignancy throughout. All the more so because of the boy's words on the two final night time spreads, 'I think about the bright days of summer and the dark tunnels underground. One day it will be my turn. I'm a miner's son. In my town, that's the way it is.'

Sydney Smith's profoundly beautiful, evocative illustrations are breathtaking and perfectly in harmony with Schwartz's lyrical text. Executed in muted watercolour shades with occasional gouache, and with images thickly outlined in black, they alternate between the bright, sunlit world of hillside town and sea, and the sombre underground mine lit only by the toiling miners' lamps.

Eloquent, sensitive yet, entirely unsentimental and profound in impact: picture books don't get much better than this one.

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