



Town Is by the Sea

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A young boy wakes up to the sound of the sea, visits his grandfather's grave after lunch and comes home to a simple family dinner with his family, but all the while his mind strays to his father digging for coal deep down under the sea. Stunning illustrations by Sydney Smith, the award-winning illustrator of *Sidewalk Flowers*, show the striking contrast between a sparkling seaside day and the darkness underground where the miners dig.

With curriculum connections to communities and the history of mining, this beautifully understated and haunting story brings a piece of Canadian history to life. The ever-present ocean and inevitable pattern of life in a Cape Breton mining town will enthrall children and move adult readers.

Town Is by the Sea Details

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From Reader Review Town Is by the Sea for online ebook

Megan Watterson says

This book was being used in a year 3/4 class on my placement. I loved this book for using with the class. There are so many messages in it of family and tradition alongside an innocent child. The author is creative in their writing and the description along with the drawings makes for a very powerful story. I would definitely recommend this book.

Karen Witzler says

Beautiful illustrations by Sydney Smith and a rare look at the world of a working-class little boy who is aware that he is expected to follow the other men in his family into work as a coal-miner.

Melki says

This is a simple story of how a Cape Breton boy spends his day in the village by the sea, contrasted with his own father's day spent mining coal. Even with its dark, dreary palette, this is a strikingly beautiful book.

A lovely portrait of a childhood in times before the internet.

KC says

The artwork is stunning. The story is a bit too long but lovely.

Nicki Fairman says

A beautiful story about a boy who watches his father go to the mines each morning, knowing this too is his future. With detailed pictures, the reader feels empathy towards the innocent child.

Steph says

It goes like this:

Read. This. Book. :-)

(Lovely. Perfect for sequencing. Perfect for lots of things.) ?

Mathew says

Seagulls call out on the shore wind and the fine mist spray of the restless sea hits us: white breakers captured in an endless wash against the cliff-slide of a small mining town in 1950s' Nova Scotia. So begins Schwartz's and Smith's ballad *Town is by the Sea* a mesmerising, dream-like ballad to a place enslaved to time and a dangerous history lost beneath the strata. [Full review here](#)

Joshua Wallington says

A lovely book exploring the life of a son of a miner who must follow within his footsteps. Beautiful images supported by effective underlying picturebook codes to promote high-quality discussion throughout the story.

Laura says

All good children's books can be read on two levels, and so can this one.

On one level, you have a simple story of a boy, in the Summer, going about his usual day of getting up, going out to play, and running errands for his mother, and having dinner with his father.

But underneath it all is the coal mine, both figuratively and literally. With each comment he makes about his day, he mentions that is where his father is, and we see him, down in the mines, working away, and almost being buried.

One one level it is sweet. On the other level it is ad that one day too, this boy will go to work the mines, because that is what he does, what the males in his family have always done.

Betsy says

There's been a lot of talk lately about how a parent can engender empathy in their children. It's a good question and worth a lot of discussion and listening. As a parent I've wondered about it myself, but it's not the only question I've asked myself. How do you give a child a sense of self-worth without false ego inflation? Does responsibility linked with a direct reward system help or hurt the child in the long run? And most importantly (and this is a kicker) how do you help a child feel grateful for the life that they lead? Gratitude is a particularly difficult feeling to get a read on. You could spend all your lifelong days telling a

kid how grateful they should feel, but are you really going to get an emotional response out of them? Enter literature. Books. Learning. On Twitter today I saw an article in passing that suggested that we learn how to be human through books. If that's the case then let me read *Town Is by the Sea* to my kids one more time. Exquisitely rendered, it's a subtle day-in-the-life title that through the repetition of the text, and the pairing of light and dark images, manages to show, not tell, how hard the life of a coal miner's kid can be.

"From my house, I can see the sea." A boy narrates a typical day in a Cape Breton mining town. While he scampers up the hills, plays with his friend, swings, walks to the store, and admires the sunlight on the water, his father toils away beneath the sea in a coal mine. The boy narrates for us how his days tend to play out and though we seem to see what looks like a collapse in the mine, nothing changes the boy's spritely text. He's no more excited than usual when his father comes home, but we know how close the man came to death. As the boy drifts off for the night we are assured that one day, down in those deep dark tunnels, "it will be my turn." And the cycle of mining will begin anew.

I love a picture book that knows how to be a picture book. Joanne Schwartz has been in this game for years and you can tell (and the fact that she's a double threat as both author and children's librarian probably doesn't hurt matters either). The choice use of repetition and simple lines lend the text this oddly comforting quality, even as some of the images grow increasingly suspect. The fact that the book is narrated in the first person present tense is a careful choice. In the voice of the boy you discovered that in the face of uncertainty (whether or not his dad will come home alive at the end of the day) the boy has organized his life precisely. The location of his house to the road, cliff, sea, and town. A catalog of sounds heard when he wakes up. The form of the boy's morning, lunch, and walk to the store. And these words are so constant and comforting to the reader that when you hit on that silent two-page spread, not knowing if the dad is alive or dead, it's a gut punch. Artist Sydney Smith is also on board with the boy's systematic cataloging, turning the bright days of summer into six distinct squares on the penultimate pages, finalizing everything with the black of the sea at night.

For such a dark concept it's not a dark book. When my husband and I read this book to our six-year-old and three-year-old they seemed more intrigued by the fact that a kid could walk by himself to the store (this is the 50s' after all) than the fact that someday that boy will work all day in the claustrophobic dark below the sea. Indeed I was intrigued to find that the chilling final lines of the picture book sink far deeper into the psyches of the adults reading this book than the kids. But I like that Joanne Schwartz does not judge the workers or the town. The inevitability of becoming a miner isn't delivered by the young protagonist with anything more than simple honesty. Just listen to those final lines: "I'm a miner's son. In my town, that's the way it goes." The dread I felt when he alluded to his future was purely personal, helped in no small part by Schwartz & Smith's clever pairing of sunlight and gloom throughout the book. You might not want to work down there, but when your future is set in stone it's hard to think outside the box. There's a quote that Schwartz includes in her Author's Note from Robert McIntosh's *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in the Coal Mines* that summarizes this perfectly. "The boy may have seen for years his father and older brothers leave for the pit. For most boys raised within these communities, the day arrived when they too surrendered their childhood to it."

Toronto artist Sydney Smith first came to the notice of a lot of American children's librarians when he illustrated JonArno Lawson's sublime *Sidewalk Flowers*. Smith captured the tone of the book so beautifully that had he any American residency at all that title would have been a true Caldecott Award contender. In "*Town Is by the Sea*" Smith stretches his proverbial limbs. Interestingly, he doesn't dwell on the industrial grit and grime of the coal mines. The image of the industrial site is almost rudimentary and down in the mines themselves he's far more interested in conveying the sheer oppressive weight of the rock and the sea by placing the workers in the lowest strata of the page. The bulk of the book is far more interested in light. How it fogs the horizon in the morning so that the line between sea and sky blurs to white. How a midday sun flecks the tips of the waves out at sea a pure white. Early afternoon sunlight through windowpanes and the sparkle of sun on sea and that sunset . . . that sunset. Though the Author's Note at the end mentions that

this book is set in the 1950s, you wouldn't necessarily notice. There's a timeless quality to these watercolors.

To feel gratitude for one's life, one needs to start out in a pretty privileged position from the start. If there's nothing to feel grateful for then you're probably not going to start because of a picture book. Still, a lot of kids in America that have regular access to picture books should feel a little gratitude for the fact that they don't have to work in the coal mines when they turn 18. You get the feeling from the boy in *Town Is by the Sea* that he is perfectly aware of how lucky he is to see the sun shining on the sea all day every day. Schwartz and Smith have created a book that is both a good story and a beautiful object. A book that grants dignity to its characters and a seriousness to its subject matter without sacrificing a child's need for play. This is, in short, a magnificent book. The kind that every reader will interpret in a different way. Only the best books can do that. Only the best books are capable.

For ages 4-9.

Phoebe Ledster says

After my first reading of this book I came away enjoying what I had seen and read. However, it was not until I had read the book for a second and third time that I was truly mesmerised.

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that this is a beautiful book with beautiful illustrations and beautiful words. I really enjoyed reading this book- it was simple but this did not take away from the impact of what I had read.

When I realised just how important mining is to the characters, this town and the author I was hit with a feeling of recognition and admiration. I interpreted this little town by the sea to be almost stuck in an endless loop- the cyclical nature of the narrative itself alongside the pattern of life within the story really shone out to me.

I really admire the way Schwartz choose to write this story with the main character anticipating what his future might bring. It was flawlessly accompanied by Smith's illustrations which highlight even more about the story.

Even though I have no links in my life to mining I was able to relate to the book and I believe children will too. From the broken swings at the playground, lost family members and the repetitive nature of the day. I would be really interested to hear children's opinions on this book and I believe they would also take a lot of value away from it.

Agn? says

3.5 out of 5

Town Is by the Sea manages to be both quietly beautiful and depressingly fatalistic. Joanne Schwartz's laconic, matter-of-fact, and somewhat repetitive text is oddly comforting, while the story's depth and mixed emotions are revealed through Sydney Smith's masterfully paced illustrations that often are worth a thousand words. The contrast between the images of the stunningly realistic sea at different points throughout the day and the claustrophobic mines is especially jarring:

Hilary says

This is a beautiful book and would make a perfect book for boys to read with their fathers and especially meaningful to anyone who has relatives who have worked in the mines.

The story follows a young boy who lives by the sea. He describes his day by the glittering sea and sunny park whilst being aware that his father is below in the coal mines. Whilst he enjoys the freedom of childhood and beautiful surroundings he is aware one day his time will come to follow his father to work in the mines.

It's a positive book though, beautiful and poetic. The illustrations are wonderful, we loved the fluid drawing of a dog running, we enjoyed the Lowry inspired scenes of the mines and the colours and effects of the light on the sea are very good. This is meant to be set in the 50's but we found no clues in the clothes or the home to show us that so we were confused at first as it looks as if it is modern day. Perhaps this was because this was a poor family, no 50's design had crept in but to us they looked contemporary. I suspect a small house was not such an indication of poverty in those times as it is now but the illustration of the kitchen is so spacious, the size of most people's entire downstairs, only part of the kitchen window is visible but I counted 21 large panes of glass, which is confusing given this is meant to be a poor family.

The author's note at the end was an interesting end point. I would highly recommend this book.

Tom Garrett says

A powerful picturebook giving insight into the life of a young miner's son who, inevitably, will end up working in the mines too. It gives a great impression of entrapment and repetition that defines the young boys life, and indeed the lives of many other children around the world today.

Schwartz's writing is bleak and Smith's illustrations are beautifully stark which helps craft this tale. Time spent with this book only enhances the experience, the subtleties of the rich illustrations for example (eg. the ever-present sea which indicates how much control it has over the family) requires great attention.

A must-have in the classroom, not only if based in miner town, as children from all backgrounds can relate to such family pressure.

Rebecca says

As the Horn Book review says, "There's a distilled, haiku-like quality to this boy's description of an ordinary summer day in a seaside coal mining town in the 1950s." This is a book to study -- one of the best pairings of words and pictures I have seen, and masterful in tone and voice. In Sydney Smith's watercolor and ink illustrations, there's the sparkly sea, the dark mines, and the world between. I see anxiety about the father's return (and the boy's future) in the rough, dark lines of the idyllic town, and the black shadow under the kitchen table. Spend some time with this one.
