



The Midnight Zoo

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

The reader who savours a description of a ?voice which was like satin under a millstone, silky and bruised and ruined? is likely to be willing to pause, maybe to reread a paragraph or to allow a scene to materialise in the mind?s eye. As with Sonya Hartnett?s **The Ghost?s Child**, this book requires reflective reading, for it is at once novel, poem, fable and myth; a young reader might also see it as a puzzle worth solving. As she has made clear in interview, Hartnett writes first for herself and then for those who care to listen. Since she writes to explore, then not only does the whole book read as a discovery, but so do individual paragraphs and even sentences. A simile or a single word can utterly surprise the reader?s expectation.

12-year-old Andrej and his three years younger brother Tomas wander in a war-ravaged landscape, carrying their baby sister with them - Czechoslovakia, it seems ? a wasteland reduced to a theatre for warring armies. The invaders, whose language ?sounds like flying chips of wood?, might well be Nazis ? they certainly speak German ? fighting for a leader who, like all warmongers, insists, ?I will have my way?. Andrej and Tomas are Roma, children of a people whose peacetime way of life plays out its own forms of freedom. Their tribe, including their parents and much-loved uncle, have been brutally swallowed by the invasion. As the children journey through the dark into a deserted village, bombed into desolation as punishment for an act of resistance, they are watched by ?the legendary black-clad horseman who is Night?, whose remote and super-human viewpoint we never quite lose. In the village, the children find one structure intact ? a small zoo, with perhaps a dozen animals locked in their cages. They are never humanised, but it turns out the creatures can speak to the boys and, though they despise mankind and its compulsive violence, their imprisonment allows them to understand the boys? terrors which inhabit their own cages of mind and body.

So begins a series of conversations and stories which explore war, oppression and cruelty in contrast to freedom, love and trust. Because of the book?s mythic qualities, ideas remain embedded in the narratives, to be experienced on the pulse as much as intellectually understood. The shadowed, moonlit world of the zoo is, in a profoundly serious way, entrancing. As far as I know, no-one else published for young people explores such themes through writing of this haunting quality.

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-midnight-zoo>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/186>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>