



The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Exciting as it is to read books by writers unfamiliar, there is a particular pleasure in finding yourself among the words of someone like [David Almond](#) [4]. A writer whom you know will take you under his wing. Tell you a captivating story.

And have you pondering important matters into the bargain.

This latest novel is sheer delight from gills to tail. It's the story of Stanley Potts, an orphan boy with a heart 'good and true' who lives with his affectionate aunt and uncle. When the local shipyard closes its doors, and Uncle Ernie loses his job, he hits on a stinky plan to restore their fortunes by canning pilchards, sardines and mackerel. Soon both the sanity of the household and Stan's schooling has been sacrificed to this fishy business. Stan pitches in gamely, until his beloved goldfish 'rescued from a nearby fairground' fall victim to his uncle's canning mania. At which point running away with the fairground folk to work on Dostoyevsky's hook-a-duck stand seems like a very good idea.

This fairy tale with fins completely engages from cast-off. There is so much to enjoy, from nasty misspeller Clarence P Clapp and his DAFT squad of inspectors from the Department for the Abolishun of Fishy Things ('vasta la histia'); to the intrepid piranha-petting Pancho Pirelli, who dreams of his boyhood on the Orinoco, even though he grew up in Ashby de la Zouch. There are amusing phonetic renditions of the way people speak ('sossij samwich' anyone?), and new life is breathed into stock phrases such as 'the price of fish'. And I love the way Almond deliberately manipulates the reader, at one point ordering: 'Oh innocent reader, just do your job and read. Just listen. Or close the book and go away. Turn to happier tales. Leave these soon-to-be-doom-laden pages behind. Go quickly'. Otherwise read on.' This is pure story telling; in the ancient and high tradition.

Whilst many writers present the things that matter to them through stark realism, often overemphasizing them as a consequence, Almond is a much subtler writer who still succeeds in having his say. **The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas** is a fable of the industrial north and its deprivations. It is a defence of travellers and a riposte to the idea that they 'leave all kinds of bother' in their wake. It's about the power of myth, and appreciating that everyday things 'even the common and garden pond goldfish' can have an uncommon beauty. And above all, it's a peon, not so much to the underdog, as to the underfish. Little Runts are, we learn, 'often the ones who turn out to be best of all'. Especially if they are prepared to confront their inner piranha.

Oliver Jeffers' kooky, cute-but-not-cute illustrations make a perfect pairing for the story too. The book itself is a handsome object, fishily festooned under its dust jacket, and an all-round pleasure to handle. My sole (ha) complaint is that Stan's red cape on the front cover is the wrong colour. Surely everyone knows that boys who swim with piranhas always wear sky-blue capes?

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