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The Whale that Fell in Love with a Submarine

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

These seven brief tales, with mysterious titles, plainly told in the manner of fables, all take place in Japan on the 15 August 1945. This was the day that Japan surrendered at the end of the Second World War. On the 6 and 9 August, atomic bombs had destroyed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and many other cities had been razed by firebombs. The loves, friendships and miraculous events of these stories take place in landscapes of devastation, in which all the normal parameters of life have been blown away, and, in the tortured, dying world, everything mutates and is made strange. A whale falls in love with a submarine and is killed by a depth charge. A child and a parrot dying of starvation in an underground shelter comfort one another almost without words. A mother desperately seeks to cool her son with her very body ? her tears, her sweat and her blood ? as they are both consumed in a firestorm. A kamikaze pilot befriends a cockroach so that at least he will have one witness to a death that he gradually realises is meaningless. An abandoned dying wolf carries an abandoned dying child through the snow in Manchuria.

The restrained manner of the telling of these events, by a Japanese author old enough to remember and whose parents and sister died, produces a kind of redemption through art. And, in this edition, his words are matched by appropriately child-like black and white illustrations. Despite the death and destruction that are the subject of most of these stories, the clear-eyed narrator refuses to give way to grief or anger. Instead he draws out a thread of hope, searching out the best qualities of humanity even at a time when there seems to be nothing human left standing. That hope is finally embodied in a story of a boy who keeps his mother?s memory alive by watering the crumbs of a cake that they had enjoyed together. Fed by his dying body these crumbs grow into a tree whose sweetness becomes the secret sustenance of the children scavenging in the ruins after the surrender, as Nosaka himself did. This is a powerful book. Whether it is book to be given to a young person and when, I am not sure. Its conviction is that in the loves and hopes of childhood we can discover what is best in us even in the worst of times.

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