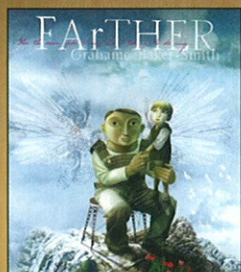


Book Reviews



FAR^{THER}

Grahame Baker-Smith
Templar, £7.99

FAR^{THER} is the first book both written and illustrated by Baker-Smith following his earlier success as the illustrator of the much-loved, and similarly magical, *Leon and the Place Between*. A Greenaway medal winner, *FAR^{THER}* uses a blend of illustration, collage and photo manipulation to bring to life the mythic dreams of flight of one man and the ways in which his obsession impacts upon his family.

The steadfastly earth-bound setting is beautifully realised in a double-page spread depicting a house elevated on a rocky outcrop, smoke rising from its chimney to join the clouds above. Amongst the clouds is the faintest impression of a set of wings of the kind that feature in the many flying machines dreamed up by the book's main characters. It is an image that is almost exactly replicated further in the book. Same house. Same cliff. A similar path of poppies. Only a tree has now grown in the garden; time has moved on. Now, instead of the suggestion of wings up amongst the clouds, there is something more distinct and concrete: a fully-realised, piloted flying machine – no longer the wishful projections of a perennial dreamer. But who is this modern-day Icarus, and how did he come to realise the dream?

FAR^{THER} is a simple, yet huge tale, beautifully told. It touches upon the bonds between father and son, the tensions between freedom and responsibility, between reality and dreams. It also briefly, and powerfully, touches upon loss and legacies of unexpected kinds. In essence, it's a visually and thematically rich book, with echoes of, and references to classic Greek mythology. It warrants several readings and close observation as the imagery is layered and there is much to be gained from poring over its carefully built details. Students will delight in spotting motifs, in looking for the instances where an "anti-gravity" comes into play, inexorably drawing the characters to the heavens.

FAR^{THER} celebrates space and freedom, and in doing so provides the space and freedom for a raft of writing opportunities. This might be through character exploration and description; exploring narrative voice through retellings; designing fantastical flying craft and explaining how they might work; exploring and describing our individual dreams, what it might take to achieve them, and what – if we are as truthful as the book manages to be – might be sacrificed in the process.

Martin Galway

Grandad's Island

Benji Davies
Simon and Schuster, £6.99

First things first. As special as *Grandad's Island* is, it is worth establishing whether this would be your first encounter with the work of Benji Davies. If it is, might I politely, and firmly, point you in the direction of two earlier, beautiful picture books of his: *The Storm Whale* and *On Sudden Hill* (the latter written by Linda Sarah and illustrated by Davies). Thematically different, these three titles share Davies' distinct visual style – richly coloured and finely-detailed, their charming illustrations establishing fully-realised settings that lend themselves very well to supporting the early development of descriptive writing skills.

On the surface, *Grandad's Island* is an adventure story concerned with Syd and Grandad's voyage to the titular tropical island. Travel is by way of a ship, magically boarded via a door in Grandad's attic. Before long Syd and Grandad are enjoying the wonders of this "most perfect place." Young readers will delight in taking in the details of this island paradise – the shelter serviced by an orang-utan; the shade of the forest; the thrill of the waterfall. On re-reading the book, they will enjoy spotting traces of the island in the early pictures of Grandad's house. For many children, this might be as deep as it goes, and that's deep enough for most young readers. For many adults too, it would seem, but there are subtle depths to the book that touch upon love and loss and the difficult feelings that go along with them.

As such, *Grandad's Island* joins a distinguished group of picture books that offer comfort and support around this difficult topic and stress the importance of memories. It's a book that caught me off guard. Having eagerly awaited its publication, I wasn't disappointed, but choosing to read it on the tube home from Foyles was possibly unwise. Deep breaths, a stiff upper lip and the practised dead-ahead stare of tube etiquette came in handy on that particular journey.

Grandad's Island maintains the very high quality of Davies' earlier work both in terms of its artwork and the emotional depths of its content. Quite simply, it's a beautiful book. I'm now back in the position of eagerly anticipating his next work; I just might need to think more carefully about where I first choose to read it.

Martin Galway

