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Wild Song

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Set in Finland, **Wild Song** is a relatively short teenage novel but one that is full of restrained, emotional power as it tells the story of Niilo, whose seemingly inexplicable anger and disruptive behaviour have driven his family to breaking point. Niilo is sent away from Helsinki to attend the Wild School on a tiny island where, with other boys excluded from mainstream education, he learns about the natural world and is taught such skills as growing food, foraging and woodwork. Niilo refuses to speak or participate and continues to be plagued by nightmares of drowning and a deep fear of the sea. The only teacher that Niilo will interact with at all is Hannu, who very gradually guides Niilo into responding to the natural world and even into learning to swim again. Hannu recognises Niilo's Sami origins and uses stories from Finnish and Sami folklore, as well as his own past trauma, to help Niilo to search for his own 'wild song'.

Niilo longs for freedom and manages to escape to another island thanks to his new swimming and survival skills and a mystical connection with a protective wild seal. Niilo is found eventually and returns to Wild School where his new confidence in his own skills and his bond with the natural world, particularly the seal, mean that he is finally able to face the truth about his past and the roots of his feelings of anger and isolation.

The final section of the book, where Niilo gradually learns that his sea phobia stems from an early childhood accident, is very moving, powerful and satisfying in its resolution, with family reconciliation and hope of a more positive future for Niilo. The author spent a month's writing residency on a Finnish island, so the book's sense of place is strong and credible, and the Sami and Finnish folklore are skilfully integrated to progress the story and develop character. Niilo's narrative voice is compelling throughout and his anger and vulnerability are well portrayed. **Wild Song** movingly explores issues of trauma, identity, loss, truth and the healing power of the natural world and will reward readers with a story of emotional realism combined with an unusual setting and a hint of folklore magic.

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