



The Family Tree

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

?In my memory, it never rained or got cold, although I suppose it must have done. I think of it as a gold and green time.? Benjie turned ten during those gold and green days. Almost twenty years later, for the first time, he revisits a house in rural Devon, remembering moving into a new home with his Mum and Dad. The adult Benjamin has come to recognise that those childhood days shaped his later life. But then, ?when you?re so young, you?re so wrapped up in yourself, aren?t you? Everything that happens is so important, so absolutely unique and brightly lit. Parents are just wallpaper. The background.?

Within a few pages, the story slips back through the years into an account told through young Benjie?s voice, punctuated here and there by a quiet comment from the older Benjamin. On that moving day, Dad seemed more excited by an ancient beech tree in the garden than the house itself, leaving Mum to organise the removal men. In its branches, Dad patiently crafts a fine tree house ? The Nest. It?s for Benjie, he says, but as months go by, Dad stops going to work and spends more and more time there himself; he eats, drinks, reads and sleeps in The Nest. Mum puts in longer and longer hours out at work, and when she does come home, she spends more and more time on the phone. She?s anxious, then irritable and finally, helplessly furious with her lost husband.

The adult Benjamin sees that the ruins of The Nest remain, neglected, in the old tree.

Mal Peet, who died too young in 2015, tells a story poignantly filtered through young Benjie?s limited perspective. The economy and directness of the language leave room for readers to bring their own reflections and memories to work with the events of the text. Barrington Stoke enhance their reputation as a publisher with an unusual awareness of how young readers read and in turn how each book shapes how it might be read. They leave open space around the print ? there are never more than 13 lines to the page, 8 to 12 words to a line, set on attractive ivory paper. Emma Shoard?s endpapers are a canopy of gold and green leaves backlit against a summer sun. Her illustrations appear on all but half a dozen of the 35 double pages and most include green and gold merging with the greys and blacks of the boughs of the old beech. Only towards the end, as the events of the text demand, do darker colours prevail. Pages are differently designed so that words and images work together for the reader, since Shoard?s contribution is integral to the wistful ambivalence of this story of around 4000 words. Everything invites a reflective read. And once a first reading is done (maybe no more than 40 minutes or so), readers might well turn back to the beginning to discover further meanings ?

not unlike reading a poem.

Determining an appropriate age group for readers of this book is tricky. Mal Peet didn't do compromise and at one point, for just a few lines, Mum's rage towards her husband 'silent and closed-off' in *The Nest* - erupts in swearing entirely appropriate to her desperation. Readers as young as Benjie could make their own sense of this account of the disintegration of a family; while the book's back cover claims this as 'Super Readable YA'. The web carries a report that in one library, the staff have already played safe and placed the book on the Adult shelves.

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