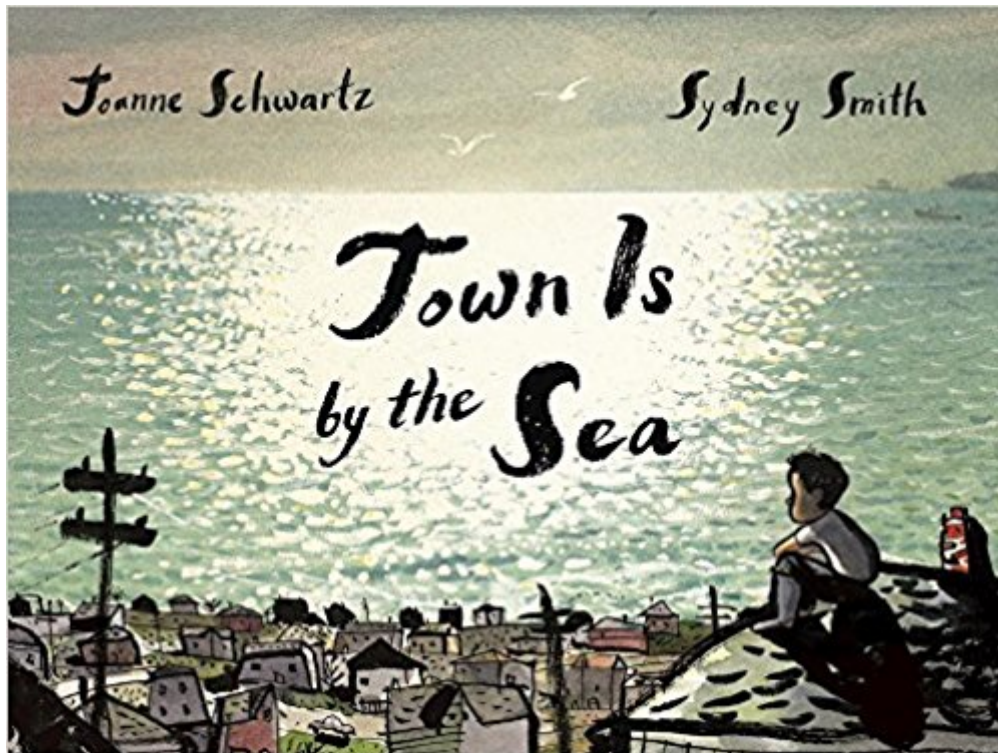




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# Town Is By The Sea



## Synopsis

A young boy wakes up to the sound of the sea, visits his grandfather's grave after lunch and comes home to a simple family dinner, but all the while his mind strays to his father digging for coal deep down under the sea. Stunning illustrations by Sydney Smith, the award-winning illustrator of *Sidewalk Flowers*, show the striking contrast between a sparkling seaside day and the darkness underground where the miners dig. With curriculum connections to communities and the history of mining, this beautifully understated and haunting story brings a piece of history to life. The ever-present ocean and inevitable pattern of life in a maritime mining town will enthrall children and move adult readers.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 550 (What's this?)

Hardcover: 52 pages

Publisher: Groundwood Books (April 11, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1554988713

ISBN-13: 978-1554988716

Product Dimensions: 11 x 0.6 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #298,645 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #19 in [Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > Canada](#) #24 in [Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Explore the World > Canada](#) #176 in [Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Where We Live > Country Life](#)

Age Range: 5 - 9 years

Grade Level: Kindergarten - 4

## Customer Reviews

About Town Is by the Sea *Boston Globe* "Horn Book Honor Book" "This quietly devastating book | stirs timeless, elemental emotions." *The New York Times* "Hauntingly beautiful." *Booklist*, starred review "A quiet book that will stay with readers long after they have closed it." *Kirkus*, starred review "Art and text meld for a powerful glimpse at a way of life that begs inspection." *School Library Journal*, starred review "This is a moving story, and a fine example of text and pictures in perfect harmony." *Horn Book*, starred

review"Smith's expressive, evocative spreads contrast the light-soaked landscape above with the night-black mine below | a sensitive way of helping readers understand that, for some, the idea of choosing a career is a luxury." Publishers Weekly"This is one of the most beautiful picture books you'll see this year. It's picture book-making at its very best." BookPage"Exquisitely rendered, it's a subtle day in the life title | This is, in short, a magnificent book." Elizabeth Bird, A Fuse 8 Production "A powerful and profound work of art that tweaks our perspective and transcends its subject." Shelf Awareness About Pinny in Summer"Whether used as a read-aloud or a bridge between early readers and chapter books, a serene treat." • Kirkus ReviewsAbout Sidewalk Flowers"An emotionally moving, visually delightful ode to the simple powers of observation and empathy. . . . A book to savor slowly and then revisit again and again." • School Library Journal, STARRED REVIEWAbout The White Cat and the Monk"The watercolor-and-ink artwork has both heft and humor, especially in the joyful depictions of the manuscripts...Readers who consider the story's underlying messages about necessities, companionship, and fulfillment will come away enriched." • Booklist, STARRED REVIEW

Joanne Schwartz was born in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Her first picture book, *Our Corner Grocery Store*, illustrated by Laura Beingessner, was nominated for the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award. Her other books include *City Alphabet* and *City Numbers*, with photos by Matt Beam, and two Inuit folktales with Cape Dorset elder Qaunaq Mikkigak; *The Legend of the Fog*, illustrated by Danny Christopher, and *Grandmother Ptarmigan*, illustrated by Qin Leng. Her most recent book is *Pinny in Summer*, illustrated by Isabelle Malenfant. Joanne has been a children's librarian for more than twenty-five years. She lives in Toronto.

Sydney Smith was born in rural Nova Scotia and has been drawing from an early age. Since graduating from NSCAD University, he has illustrated multiple children's books, including the highly acclaimed wordless picture book *Sidewalk Flowers*, conceived by Jon Arno Lawson, which won a Governor General's Award and was shortlisted for the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal. He is also the illustrator of *Grant and Tillie Go Walking* by Monica Kulling and *The White Cat and the Monk* by Jo Ellen Bogart. Sydney has received the Amelia Frances Howard Gibbon Illustrator's Award. He now lives in Toronto and works in a shared studio space in Chinatown.

This is a moving book and just a bit sad. You really feel the father's love for his family and the sacrifices he makes to provide for them, poignant more than sad. We get to see the boy and his

slow-paced summer day that takes him past the beach many times. Each time he thinks, "And deep down under that sea, my father is digging for coal." This thought is accompanied by a picture of his dad in the dark, small coal mine under the sea. Smith does a great job contrasting the life above ground with the life under ground. My favorite illustration though occurs near the end of the book. The day is nearly done and the family is sitting together around the dinner table looking relaxed and yet there is blackness under the table. We spent some time contemplating this picture and my daughter and I discussed it at length. The ultimate verdict is that although the family is relaxed and enjoying time together, under the surface, even at the table with them, lurks the specter of the coal and its pervasive, invasive presence. The end of the story is the sad part really. The boy is in bed and he shares his nighttime routine just as he shared his day. "At nighttime, it goes like this-" He goes on to think about the sea, and his father, and summer days, and the mine. Then he ends with, "One day, it will be my turn. I'm a miner's son. In my town, that's the way it goes." I thought it was so sad. My husband, ever the pragmatic one, commented that there was nothing wrong with being a miner. I explained that I was not sad that the boy might be a miner but that the boy didn't seem to have a choice. It is the lack of options, being burdened with a future he might not choose for himself that made me feel sad. Overall, an enjoyable book that made our whole family remember to be grateful for what we have and taught us a bit about undersea mining as well!!

In a coal town in Cape Breton, Canada, a boy wakes up to a summer day. He wakes to the sound of the sea, spends some time with his friends. Still, his mind continues to think of his father mining for coal deep under the sea in the darkness. He runs errands for his mother and visits his grandfather's grave which looks out over the sea. His grandfather too was a coal miner and the boy knows that it is his future as well. Schwartz has created a book set in the 1950s in a coal town where families worked in the mines for generations. Even as the book shows a richness of a well-spent childhood, it is overshadowed by the presence of the coal mine in the boy's life and how it impacted his family and his father in particular. She wisely works to contrast life above the ground with that below, showing a childhood of fresh breezes and sunlight that will turn into a life spent primarily in darkness. Smith's illustrations clearly depict the claustrophobia of the mines, filling the page with smothering darkness and only a couple of men in a tunnel. This contrasts with his illustrations of days spent near the sea, sometimes the sun nearly blinding as it shines off the water. There is a sense of the inevitable in the book, of life paths already formed. A glimpse of Canadian history, this picture book will appeal to older readers. Appropriate for ages 6-9.

There's been a lot of talk lately about how a parent can engender empathy in their children. It's a good question and worth a lot of discussion and listening. As a parent I've wondered about it myself, but it's not the only question I've asked myself. How do you give a child a sense of self-worth without false ego inflation? Does responsibility linked with a direct reward system help or hurt the child in the long run? And most importantly (and this is a kicker) how do you help a child feel grateful for the life that they lead? Gratitude is a particularly difficult feeling to get a read on. You could spend all your lifelong days telling a kid how grateful they should feel, but are you really going to get an emotional response out of them? Enter literature. Books. Learning. On Twitter today I saw an article in passing that suggested that we learn how to be human through books. If that's the case then let me read *Town Is by the Sea* to my kids one more time. Exquisitely rendered, it's a subtle day-in-the-life title that through the repetition of the text, and the pairing of light and dark images, manages to show, not tell, how hard the life of a coal miner's kid can be. "From my house, I can see the sea." A boy narrates a typical day in a Cape Breton mining town. While he scampers up the hills, plays with his friend, swings, walks to the store, and admires the sunlight on the water, his father toils away beneath the sea in a coal mine. The boy narrates for us how his days tend to play out and though we seem to see what looks like a collapse in the mine, nothing changes the boy's spritely text. He's no more excited than usual when his father comes home, but we know how close the man came to death. As the boy drifts off for the night we are assured that one day, down in those deep dark tunnels, "it will be my turn." And the cycle of mining will begin anew. I love a picture book that knows how to be a picture book. Joanne Schwartz has been in this game for years and you can tell (and the fact that she's a double threat as both author and children's librarian probably doesn't hurt matters either). The choice use of repetition and simple lines lend the text this oddly comforting quality, even as some of the images grow increasingly suspect. The fact that the book is narrated in the first person present tense is a careful choice. In the voice of the boy you discovered that in the face of uncertainty (whether or not his dad will come home alive at the end of the day) the boy has organized his life precisely. The location of his house to the road, cliff, sea, and town. A catalog of sounds heard when he wakes up. The form of the boy's morning, lunch, and walk to the store. And these words are so constant and comforting to the reader that when you hit on that silent two-page spread, not knowing

if the dad is alive or dead, it's a gut punch. Artist Sydney Smith is also on board with the boy's systematic cataloging, turning the bright days of summer into six distinct squares on the penultimate pages, finalizing everything with the black of the sea at night. For such a dark concept it's not a dark book. When my husband and I read this book to our six-year-old and three-year-old they seemed more intrigued by the fact that a kid could walk by himself to the store (this is the 50s after all) than the fact that someday that boy will work all day in the claustrophobic dark below the sea. Indeed I was intrigued to find that the chilling final lines of the picture book sink far deeper into the psyches of the adults reading this book than the kids. But I like that Joanne Schwartz does not judge the workers or the town. The inevitability of becoming a miner isn't delivered by the young protagonist with anything more than simple honesty. Just listen to those final lines:

"I'm a miner's son. In my town, that's the way it goes. The dread I felt when he alluded to his future was purely personal, helped in no small part by Schwartz & Smith's clever pairing of sunlight and gloom throughout the book. You might not want to work down there, but when your future is set in stone it's hard to think outside the box.

There's a quote that Schwartz includes in her Author's Note from Robert McIntosh's "Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in the Coal Mines" that summarizes this perfectly. "The boy may have seen for years his father and older brothers leave for the pit. For most boys raised within these communities, the day arrived when they too surrendered their childhood to it." Toronto artist Sydney Smith first came to the notice of a lot of American children's librarians when he illustrated Jon Arno Lawson's sublime "Sidewalk Flowers". Smith captured the tone of the book so beautifully that had he any American residency at all that title would have been a true Caldecott Award contender. In "Town Is by the Sea" Smith stretches his proverbial limbs. Interestingly, he doesn't dwell on the industrial grit and grime of the coal mines. The image of the industrial site is almost rudimentary and down in the mines themselves he's far more interested in conveying the sheer oppressive weight of the rock and the sea by placing the workers in the lowest strata of the page. The bulk of the book is far more interested in light. How it fogs the horizon in the morning so that the line between sea and sky blurs to white. How a midday sun flecks the tips of the waves out at sea a pure white. Early afternoon sunlight through windowpanes and the sparkle of sun on sea and that sunset . . . that sunset.

Though the Author's Note at the end mentions that this book is set in the 1950s, you wouldn't necessarily notice. There's a timeless quality to these watercolors. To feel gratitude for one's life, one needs to start out in a pretty privileged position from the start. If there's nothing to feel grateful for then you're probably not going to start because of a picture book. Still, a lot of kids in America that have regular access to picture books should feel a little gratitude for the fact that they don't have to work in the coal mines when they turn 18. You get the feeling from the boy in "Town Is by the Sea" that he is perfectly aware of how lucky he is to see the sun shining on the sea all day every day. Schwartz and Smith have created a book that is both a good story and a beautiful object. A book that grants dignity to its characters and a seriousness to its subject matter without sacrificing a child's need for play. This is, in short, a magnificent book. The kind that every reader will interpret in a different way. Only the best books can do that. Only the best books are capable. For ages 4-9.

Beautifully written and illustrated. What a wonderful way to help a child empathize with a situation they may not have access to. The juxtaposition of the child's sunny day vs. the father under the ground is very powerful. A wonderfully moving book.

This is a lovely book -- lyrical words, beautiful pictures -- about family and tradition. Both poignant and heartwarming. Love it.

this is a subject close to my heart, so I may have shed a few tears while reading . . . very well done.

Very moving, real, and beautifully illustrated.

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