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A Pocketful of Stars: Poems about the Night

Nikki Siegen-Smith
Emma Shaw-Smith, illustrator
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Once bedtime stories and rituals, e.g., one last drink of water, are over and lights are turned off, children are left to face the dark. Night can be scary or filled with wonder. “Darkness is at once fascinating and frightening,” says Sigen-Smith.

A Pocketful of Stars explores the mysteries of night in a collection of old and new poems, humorous and serious. Sigen-Smith has selected some poems that acknowledge the frightening aspects of night, such as bats, goblins, bad dreams and monsters. In “Nightmare,” by Siv Widerberg, the child admits that despite all precautions of crossing toes and counting to eight, “Still he comes sometimes…glaring at me with his eyes / grating with his nails / and sneering his big sneer / the Scratch Man.”

She also includes poems that celebrate the beauty of the night sky, such as Carl Sandburg’s “Summer Star.” The poem is accompanied by one of the best illustrations in the book. It depicts an African-American father—Sandburg’s long-arm man—reaching into the heavens to “pick off stars” to place in a boy’s upturned palm. A child’s anthology about the night would not be complete without lullabies or poems, such as Grace Nichols? “I Like to Stay Up.” The poem expresses the difficulty of going to sleep when the child has been listening to the grown-up’s jumbie (“ghost”) stories instead of reading her own book.

As a head teacher and school inspector in England, Siegen-Smith knows her young audience. Her first two books were highly acclaimed. The Barefoot Book of Songs for Survival was a winner in the American Folklore Society’s Aesop Accolade and Welcome to the World was praised by the New York Times as a “small treasure.”

Sigen-Smith writes “Poetry has a great way of making fears manageable.”

Young readers will discover that their fears are common. They may learn how to deal with them, as they listen to selections such as Michelle Magorian’s poem: “And when it’s dark and I can’t sleep / I lie back and pretend / That every light crossing my room / Is a secret night-time friend.”

Then, when “Night comes leaking out of the sky. / Stars come peeking. / Moon comes sneaking / silvery-sly./ Who is shaking, shivery, quaking? / Who is afraid of the night?” the reader can answer with poet Beatrice Schenk de Regniers, “Not I.”

LINDA SALISBURY (August 16, 1999)

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