

Janna and the Kings

Patricia Smith

Aaron Boyd, Illustrator

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Janna's favorite day of the week is Saturday, the day she spends with Granddaddy and the other "kings" of the neighborhood barbershop. When her mother breaks the news that her grandfather's heart has "gone to sleep," Janna almost loses her special day forever. After weeks of mourning, she retraces their Saturday route, pausing at the barbershop door to look inside. The kings welcome her back, and in their company she feels the warm healing power of memory easing her grief.

While this is the author's first offering for children, she is an accomplished journalist, playwright, and performer, as well as a four-time individual champion of the National Poetry Slam. The publisher, which specializes in multicultural literature for children, selected this volume for a New Voices Award, presented for exceptional children's picture books by writers of color. Smith's skill with language is apparent in her narrator's voice, which perfectly captures the setting and characters, inspired by her own childhood memories. Her writing is filled with child-friendly imagery: early on Saturday, Janna wakes to "the music of a no-school morning." Granddaddy's "hair looked like cotton candy snow," she says, and his voice was "smooth and growly at the same time."

Mirroring the rich descriptive text are detailed watercolor illustrations that will have a similarly strong appeal to young readers. This is the illustrator's second picture book; his artwork has previously appeared in educational and children's magazines. He depicts Janna and her world in vibrant two-page spreads bursting with action. For example, in a scene showing Granddaddy's arrival one Saturday morning, he is waving through the window, Mama is braiding Janna's hair, and baby Rashid is reaching out of his high chair, spoon in hand, while Janna has just pushed away her breakfast plate.

Janna's display of courage in returning to the barbershop after her grandfather's death will endear her to young readers, and the neighborhood she lives in is brought alive through the narrative and illustrations. The obvious target audience for this story is a child who is grieving the loss of a loved one, but anyone who has suffered a loss will appreciate Janna's story, and perhaps be inspired to recreate a favorite memory as she does.

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