

Painting Sunsets: A Story for Young Artists

Stephen Evans

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Aiming to inspire young artists, this fantasy story hits its mark.

In Stephen Evans's *Painting Sunsets*, a young girl finds her creative calling at a completely unexpected time and place.

Twelve-year old Lissa is the daughter of artists. Her father, a poet and professor, shares his love of language through impromptu etymology lessons and verses from poems that bring back memories of Lissa's mother, a wildlife photographer who died in an accident while on assignment when Lissa was just five. Lissa and her father take trip to Key West, where he proposed to Lissa's mother fifteen years earlier under a spectacular sunset.

They have only been in Key West for a few minutes when Lissa tumbles into the Gulf of Mexico and into a fantastic undersea world, Kwest, where she moves, breathes, and talks to friendly animals. They help her along a golden path toward a submerged city filled with colorful creatures whose lives revolve around art and beauty, and where most of the story takes place.

The setting is spectacular, featuring sea anemones, coral, and the other vivid living things, though it is under-illustrated, especially since so much of the story's theme revolves around the stunning colors of the natural world. The story pays homage to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* through the fanciful English-speaking sea creatures that offer Lissa guidance as she travels down the golden path; their riddle-like responses often introduce as many questions as answers for Lissa. While the tribute's tone is on target, especially when the book incorporates lines of poetry and clever dialogue, it tends to slow the story without adding significantly to its character development or action.

Lissa's progress down the golden path slows the story down; she isn't faced with any significant challenges on the route. She is the only character who is fully fleshed out; most other other characters are only briefly introduced, and even central characters are left behind for much of the narrative. This is especially true for her dad, whom she refers to formally throughout.

Her father's influence is most evident in the lines of classical poetry that are woven into Lissa's speech. A list of referenced poems is included for further study. Beautifully written sentences describe the undersea world without unnecessary adjectives, demonstrating that the written word can be used as artfully as a pastels or paints. While this makes the book enjoyable on many levels, the story's rather abrupt ending leaves many of its potential plot points unexplored.

Aiming to inspire young artists, this fantasy story hits its mark, conveying that art is essential to everyday life and that beauty is everywhere for those who take the time to look at the sunset and listen for the artistry that can be unleashed by the written word.

CHARLENE OLDHAM (August 16, 2018)

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