ForeWord Reviews

JUVENILE FICTION

The Midnight Zoo
Sonya Hartnett
Andrea Offermann, illustrator
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As the only survivors of their gypsy encampment invaded by Nazi soldiers, twelve-year-old Andrej and nine-year-old Tomas wander from town to town, dodging falling bombs and searching for freedom. Finally, the brothers find solace in a still-standing zoo among the ruins of a village. Curiosity gets the better of them and the children peer in at the menagerie: a bear, a wolf, a lioness, a chamois, a kangaroo, an eagle, a boar, a seal, and a llama. Then, the animals begin to talk.

With eager ears, the young gypsies listen to the story of the abandoned beasts. After leading a rebellion against the invaders, Alice, the zookeeper's daughter and friend of the animals, has disappeared, leaving her wards behind. After the bombs came and destroyed the village, the zoo was the last place standing. The boys feel sympathetic towards the trapped animals and share what little food they have stored in their packs. Bonding over the meal, Thomas and Andrej tell of their travels on the lam. As Romanies, the boys have been continuously persecuted by the injustices of WWII-era fascism, sleeping during the day and taking flight in the night. The situations of both the animals and the orphans are similar, as they have no one to turn to and nowhere to go. Andrej, wise beyond his years, sums it up by saying, "I'm not in a cage, but—I don't feel free. If you are free, you should be safe. And I don't *feel* safe. I always feel … hunted."

From the depths of his cage, the boar lets forth his opinion. "You claim to be different from the *gadje*, but you aren't. Humans are all exactly the same. Each of you lives in a fever of selfishness and destruction. You persecute the creatures that you fear, yet the species you should fear most is your own."

This wisdom of the imprisoned animals gives the boys a new perspective on the war and the lives they have inherited. Sonya Hartnett's fine interpretation of WWII represents the profound effects of war on all living beings, and while her ending never ties together the loose ends of the plot (even as Alice makes a reappearance), it leaves one to imagine the various

outcomes. *The Midnight Zoo* uses illustrative language—“the tower now stood against the sky like a blunt, unfinished question” and “a darkness like the edge of a disquieting dream”— to introduce themes such as loyalty and the costs of freedom that apply equally to everyone, no matter their age.

Emma Beauchamp