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The Yellow Train

Alistair Highet
Francois Roca, illustrator
Creative Company The (October 2000)
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If the original 1949 French version of this handsomely illustrated picturebook is not a classic, it should be. On the surface it is the story of a young boy who rides a train to visit his grandfather, who used to be the conductor of the Yellow Train, but the story has another intergenerational message. Grampa plans to take Theo for a ride back in time to show the boy what his life was like when he was in his prime.

"When I was a young man, I drove this train to the most wonderful places," Grampa tells Theo as he teaches him how to operate the train. As they travel to the snow-covered mountains, the plains and jungles, they see his old friends and fierce enemies. Then Grampa sadly confides that his train carried the materials to build the cities that eventually destroyed his beloved countryside.

Once the cities were built, the Yellow Train became obsolete and was replaced by the large, modern, speedy blue engines. Grampa explains that he has taken Theo on this journey so he could see the "world that I saw when I was a young man." He swears the boy to secrecy and gives Theo the keys to the train, so that he can always take imaginative journeys on his own.

It is puzzling that the new English version leaves out much of the original story and makes changes that seem to make Theo unnecessarily babyish. The English text, for example, changes the speaker's voice from third to first person, and changes Theo's character. In the original, Theo is an avid reader of adventure stories, and regrets that his ride to visit grandfather happens too quickly for him to finish the last six chapters of his book. It was a nice touch and gave the boy personality and an older age.

Readers who are likely to see only the new version, without the old for comparison, should still enjoy Theo's poignant adventure with his grandfather.

Roca's brilliant artwork captures the somber, gritty, industrial nature of cities, the mysterious foliage of jungles, the fun of a circus pulling a train, and the charming innocence of Grampa, Theo, and the Yellow Train itself. There are fun details for children to observe on many pages.

This is a visual "ride" to be taken again and again.

LINDA SALISBURY (October 16, 2000)

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