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King of the Sky

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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This poignant story is narrated by a boy Peter, who has come from Italy to live in a Welsh mining town. Yearning for the ?sunlight, fountains and the vanilla smell of ice-cream? which have been replaced by smoking chimneys, clanking metal towers, streets smelling of mutton soup and coal dust, the lad is feeling an almost overwhelming sense of disconnection and disorientation. The only saving grace is elderly Mr Evans with his soft, slow manner of speaking, and his racing pigeons kept in a loft behind Peter?s house.

The kindly man gives the boy one of his pigeons ? the one he predicts will become a champion racer ? and Peter names him ?Re del cielo! King of the Sky!?

During training flights, Peter?s white-headed bird fails to prove itself, always coming in behind the others: ?Just you wait and see!? is Mr Evans? response, likening him to the heroic message-carrying pigeons of wartime depicted in a particularly affecting scene of almost ghost-like gun-carrying troops.

As the old man becomes increasingly frail, his assistant takes on the role of chief trainer and then comes the day when Mr Evans gives him an entry form for a race; a race of more than a thousand miles, starting in Rome. The bird is duly dispatched by train, along with, so Peter feels, a part of himself. Then comes the wait.

For two whole days and nights of storms a fretful boy watches in vain for a sighting of his bird with the milk-white head; could he perhaps have been beguiled by the sunlit fountains and aroma of vanilla ice-cream? Mr Evans won?t hear of such things and sends Peter back out to await the return. Finally out of the clouds comes not only a champion bird, but with him, a very important realisation on Peter?s part.

For her compelling tale of friendship, love, displacement, loss, hope and home, the author draws upon a time of steam trains and hay carts pulled by horses in the fairly recent history of South Wales, when large numbers of immigrants came from Italy. Illustrator, Laura Carlin?s smudgy, soft-focus illustrations evoke that era perfectly. Many spread across entire double pages stretching the narrative and giving a pigeon-eyed perspective to the expansive and atmospheric landscapes and skylscapes.

In our troubled times of seemingly ever increasing numbers of people having to leave their home countries and seek

safety in other parts, often completely unlike their homeland, this eloquent and affecting book is ideal for opening up discussions about what that might feel like.

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