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The Boy Giant

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Omar is a twelve-year old Afghan refugee. He and his mother want to get to England but his mother says he is to go ahead alone. She will join him later. Omar begins his journey in an overloaded yellow dinghy, a journey which nearly costs him his life. When he comes ashore not in England but in Lilliput, his arrival feels like Gulliver's. The reader does not know for certain whether Omar's perception of himself as huge is real or imagined.

Omar spends the next four years with the Lilliputians and without his mother. He believes that she has reached England before him. Omar is befriended by two Lilliputians, Zaya and Natoban. They teach him English and escort him round the island, becoming his best friends while he is in Lilliput. The novel now poses the question whether Omar and his two best friends will ever reach England. Will Omar be reunited with his mother?

Opening a Morpurgo book, one expects to find oneself in a strong relationship with the narrative and the characters. That is the reputation the author has built. With this book, this reviewer did not feel the expected relationship. Morpurgo has attempted to combine two very different genres, the realistic narrative of refugees in flight from danger or poverty and the more imaginative intertext with and retelling of Swift's famous fantasy. If any author could combine these very disparate elements, it would seem that Morpurgo could do so. But in fact the strain of combination seems to be too severe even for him. Once the reader has become reconciled to the dissonance of the two themes, the read is enjoyable. But the dissonance remains.

Two themes dominate the text, namely the need to be kind and welcoming to strangers and the need to eliminate war. But both themes seem to be hammered home in an uncharacteristically blunt and unsubtle manner. The author's many admirers will feel that on this occasion he has not quite lived up to his past standard.

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