



Hans Christian Andersen Award 2024

SYDNEY SMITH

Illustrator Nominee
(Canada)

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Introduction

The Hans Christian Andersen Nominating Committee of IBBY Canada is pleased and honoured to introduce Sydney Smith as the illustrator we have selected for consideration by the 2024 Hans Christian Andersen Jury.

When **IBBY Canada launched a special initiative** to welcome Syrian refugee families coming to Canada with a gift, they selected the ideal book: JonArno Lawson and Sydney Smith’s wordless *Sidewalk Flowers* (2015). Despite fears and insecurities that arise as a child navigates an unfamiliar and often threatening environment, the book is, **as Maria Popova writes**, “a gentle wordless celebration of the true material of aliveness.” **A *New York Times* reviewer** wrote that in a book like this, “language would seem intrusive or didactic. The absence of text seems to provide a more eloquent and nuanced story, one that allows children to freely share their perceptions of the narrative.”

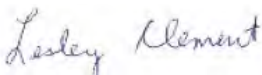
This democratization of perspectives is Sydney Smith’s trademark and goal, as he articulated in a video prepared for the virtual presence of Canada, which was the guest of honour at the 2021 Frankfurt Book Fair: “I’m trying to speak to the experience of child as human, not as a separate organism.” Smith understands that these experiences often have no labels and no buffers for children. One of three authors and illustrators selected to represent Canada’s “singular and plural identity” in this video, Smith says that through his art he aspires to show that “beyond the small details, people are the same” (“**Conversations: Picture Perfect / L’art d’illustrer**”).

It was during his years studying for an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (conferred in 2006) at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, that Smith’s childhood “playing” with drawing became “serious,” and he recognized his calling — the “invisible force,” he calls it, that identified and defined him as an illustrator of children’s books (“**Conversations: Picture Perfect / L’art d’illustrer**”). After several years of poster and album cover design, he apprenticed as an illustrator of Sheree Fitch’s republished books of children’s poetry (2010–2012) and Jill Barber’s *Music Is for Everyone* (2014) with Nimbus Publishing (Halifax). His move to Toronto and illustrating for Groundwood Books and Neal Porter/Holiday House (New York) brought Smith to national and international recognition for the urban energy of books like *Sidewalk Flowers* and *Small in the City* (2019; written and illustrated by Smith), both recipients of the Governor General’s Literary Award for Young People’s Literature — Illustrated Books. Recently the luminosity of *The White Cat and the Monk* (2016), *Town Is by the Sea* (2017), and *I Talk Like a River* (2020) has earned him accolades, including the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for *Town Is by the Sea*. He has received five *New York Times*/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children’s Books citations (2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020) and a *New York Times* Kids Notable (2018). A new book, *My Baba’s Garden*, will be published by Penguin Random House and Neal Porter Books/Holiday House in March 2023. The book’s promotional material indicates that “Smith’s illustrations capture the sensational impressions of a child’s memory with iconic effect.”

Smith enjoys exploring and experimenting with new narrative structures, character perspectives, and artistic challenges. What remains a constant is the empathy with which he approaches his subject matter and that he inspires in his readers. With his books now being published in over twenty languages and territories, this empathy for small people in seemingly mundane places speaks to a global community about singularity and plurality and the intersection of the two.

IBBY Canada is honoured to nominate Sydney Smith for the 2024 Hans Christian Andersen Award. His outstanding and continued contribution to the literary and artistic heritage of children’s literature in Canada and internationally makes him a deserving candidate.

Lesley D. Clement, PhD



IBBY Canada, Regional Councillor Ontario
Co-Chair HCA Nomination Committee
January 2023

Nicholas Aumais



IBBY Canada, Acting Regional Councillor Québec
Co-Chair HCA Nomination Committee
January 2023



Statement of Contribution to Children's Literature

Submitted by Professor Deirdre Baker

“Listen!” Sydney Smith tells children to whom he is presenting his books; then he plays a series of soundscapes he has created — of city, sea, and river. Soundscapes suit Smith's work, especially *Small in the City*, *Town Is by the Sea*, and *I Talk Like a River*, but it is not just through geographical features that listening suits his *oeuvre*: really, he says in an interview with me in April 2022, “listening ... is more in line with how I approach stories.” He says this in relation to illustrating the texts of others and to writing and illustrating his own stories. That word, *listening*, literal and figurative, aptly evokes the deep attentiveness of Smith's art and text: attentiveness to the nuances of language, possibilities of counterpoint, unreliable narrators and imagery, and especially to the emergent experience of emotion and meaning.

In interviews, Smith has remarked that children return most often to books they find a little scary, ones that express emotions that unsettle them. There is something about slightly familiar, yet slightly unknown, feelings that the child is drawn to puzzle out and revisit — feelings one might almost call “adult,” perhaps of loss, heartbreak, or anxiety. I say one might *almost* call such feelings “adult” because, for Smith, picture books do not pose a separation between child and adult: they are about human experience and emotion, part of any and every age. Picture books constitute an intimate revelation by author and illustrator to the viewer — person to person, rather than adult to child.

These perceptions are the underpinnings of Smith's genius and power as an illustrator — the expression of complex and possibly unsettling emotion, and respect for the reader/viewer as one who feels those emotions. They saturate his illustrations, both in stories that are lighter hearted, such as *Sidewalk Flowers*, and those that are anguished, such as *I Talk Like a River*. Through a judicious mix of expansive double spreads and multi-panelled pages; through images of fracture, reflection, and shadow; through colour and play with mixed media; and through his interpretation of place, Smith makes intense, complex feeling visible in a way that is exceptional in children's illustration. His accomplishment in this makes him worthy of the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

In *Sidewalk Flowers*, a wordless story conceived by poet JonArno Lawson, Smith's multi-panelled pages show the narrative and, at the same time, engage the viewer as participant in the story's theme. The book opens with a streetscape and a child and father walking together. At once, Smith faces this with a nine-panelled page. Each panel shows what the girl notices: adults' legs; a tattooed arm; the profile of someone in a car; from shoulders down, a woman who struts like a pigeon; the upper body and face of the girl's father as he talks on his phone; the lower part of a bicycle chained to a post; and in the last panel, the image that initiates the story's action and the only colour the girl has spotted — a few dandelions. Through the barrage of fractured glimpses, Smith makes us experience what the story is about: perceiving the abundant, meaningful visual detail to be found even in performing a routine chore. The girl's close observation, first of the city's plant life and then of the humble creatures she honours by adorning them with flowers, flows integrally from this multi-panelled page. Later, Smith extends the exercise of observation through close-ups that follow the girl's acts of decoration — points at which the reader becomes a sympathetic observer as acute as the protagonist. The girl's responses to life and growth (the flowers), vulnerability (the dead sparrow, the sleeping man, the dog) and affection (her mother and siblings) thus become moments the viewer contemplates deeply.

Throughout *Sidewalk Flowers*, colour doubles and illuminates the story's emotional trajectory. Black, sepia, and grey dominate the streetscape as the story opens. The girl's red hoodie, never delineated by the black outlines otherwise

characteristic in this book, is a vibrant, unconstrained marker of how alive she is to her environment and of how much she brightens it. Gradually, as she distributes flowers, Smith allows grass, trees, architecture, people, and wildlife to take on colour, intensifying its shades and variety until the story culminates with the luminous amber and auburn of the mother and her embrace. The garden of home is suffused with green, with the reds and pinks of tulips, hyacinths, and the girl's rosy siblings — a glowing language for the warmth of affection. In this way, Smith acknowledges the reader's capacity for emotional understanding, and for appreciating the girl's inclination for observation and quick, relational connection to the world around her. These very techniques and artistic strategies are what have made this book speak so immediately and directly to the many refugee children to whom it has been given through an IBBY Canada initiative.

In *Small in the City*, a story Smith both wrote and illustrated, he goes further in subtly, relentlessly deepening emotional intensity through multiple panels and imagery of place. In the opening pages, the ungendered child protagonist is backlit by blurred streetscapes seen through a streetcar window. When the child leaves the streetcar, those images come into focus in the stark lines of skyscrapers, cables, streetcar rails, and pedestrians' clothing, fracturing into multiple small, impressionistic panels on the following page, a challenge to the eye. A section of chain-link fence; pedestrians and their black reflections; a crowd of heads; skeletal branches; spectacles on a blank face; and everywhere, angles, lines, shadows, and reflections of windows — these images multiply in an already over-crowded space, creating a palpable sense of cacophony and confusion that, appropriately, overloads the child's restrained statements. In following pages, the fractured, wavering view of the child's reflection distorted in a wobbly surface belies the calm words: "I know what it's like to be small in the city ... But I know you. You'll be all right ..."

The snowfall that begins as the child enters a calmer neighbourhood replaces the emotional language of the city centre, increasingly blurring and smearing the scenes as the child gives "you" advice — advice that often emphasises, rather than diminishes, the sense of threat ("Don't go down this alley. It's too dark ... This empty lot looks like a good place to rest, but the bushes have burrs ..."). By the time we realise that "you" is the child's lost pet, snow has almost extinguished all objects in miasmic grey and white streaks. Both cityscape and snowfall speak the anxiety of heartbreak and loss, to which the valiant child's restrained speech is a poignant counterpoint. The child's pervasive, unspoken anticipation of grief, the unsettling heart of this work, is thus richly available through Smith's imagery and design.



Town Is by the Sea, a story by Joanne Schwartz, is all about place, especially in relation to how it determines the child's present and future as a coal miner's son in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Through pairing double-page spreads and panelled views, Smith suffuses the story's calm, matter-of-fact narration with tension. He illustrates Schwartz's refrain of "the sea is ..." ("all sparkling," "calm," etc.) with two-page spreads (a wide 21 x 55 cm), creating an expanse of water, motion, and reflected light that seems to radiate from the book's centre. But it is the juxtaposition of this luminous glory with the illustration of the following pages' refrain ("deep down under that sea, my father is digging for coal") with which Smith generates the fundamental, fateful anxiety endemic to the life of a miner's family, something unstated in Schwartz's text. In these spreads, textured, flowing darkness extends massively across both pages to within a mere centimetre of the lower margin, where a dim lightening shows two miners working in a tunnel. The upper world/under world pages destabilize the story of routine the boy tells: the course of these repeated dark spreads throughout the book convey the father's story — and the boy's future. We watch the father in the darkness dig, drill, shield himself from falling rock, and finally, disappear altogether in a mound of black rubble — perhaps never to be seen again.

In the wordless spread following the tunnel's collapse, Smith presents four panels not of dark, but of light. Each shows the back door from inside the kitchen; each is illumined and darkened differently as light and shadow move with the ever-lowering sun. The window in the door remains empty as sunlight and shadow creep up the wall, surely indicating that it is time father was home. *Why isn't he?* the viewer wonders. Not until the last panel does the father's image appear, resolving tension and uncertainty — the very real prospect of a day on which he will not return. Smith leaves the implications of these wordless pages for the viewer's own perceptions: it could be that the afternoon simply runs long for the boy awaiting his father's return; or, in view of the previous pages' collapsing tunnel, this sunlight and shadow could be terrifying and suspenseful, anticipating tragedy. Smith thus gives Schwartz's subtle text a tremulous, even agonising, understory, one accessible through imagery and a measured play of double spreads and multiple panels.

Smith pushes the relationship of emotion, place and body with dramatic force in his illustrations for Jordan Scott's *I Talk Like a River*, a poetic first-person narrative about a boy who stutters. In Scott's text, the boy describes words he cannot easily say — the pine, crow, and moon he sees out his window — as growing roots inside his mouth or sticking in his throat. Smith's challenge is to make this physical, auditory, and emotional experience visually available. The intense immanence of setting in *Small in the City* here becomes something dynamic, features of place that impose themselves onto and into the body, first through the rigid crossbar of the window frame and reflections on the boy's skin; then, as the boy struggles to express himself, branches, moon, and crow grow over, take over, his face, colonizing his eye, cheeks, and forehead. In forcibly scraping paint away to draw the spiky pine branches, crow's feet, and cawing beak, Smith makes the sense of violence and violation in the boy's physical and emotional agony stark and potent.

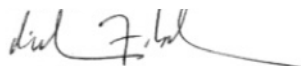
Words, the objects they signify, and the body that speaks them are aggressively identified with one another through Scott's text and the physicality of Smith's imagery. In illustrating the book's central themes, talk and flow, Smith dramatically envisions what Scott describes in his afterword as "intricately intimate labours with words, sound, and body." Scott's text provides the river as setting for a father-and-son conversation; Smith allows that river to take over the pages through a series of riverscapes. When the boy's father tells him he "talks like a river," Smith's illustrations move fluently toward mesmerising close-ups of turbulent water in six horizontal panels. In the upper left, we see the boy's dark, open eyes, staring into the water; in the bottom right, he has closed his eyes, as if taking into himself what he has seen and comprehended. The four panels between show water, spattering, bubbling, and swirling with whites, blues, and greys, implying the boy's intent absorption of the river's ever-

changing motion as a way to understand and appreciate himself. The cognitive and emotional process becomes visually and affectively dynamic in Smith’s rendering, and a gatefold in the next spread turns figurative to physical as we open the boy’s face and find — in the equivalent of a four-page spread — what is within his head: the splendour of the geographical entity, the river. The play of light on water, something Smith excels at, creates a festive luminosity in the boy’s moment of transformation as he perceives his own apparent lack of “fluency” as something he shares with the natural, life-giving, and infinitely beautiful body of water. The intricate intimacy of word, sound, and body becomes visually and concretely apparent, and the physical act in which the reader engages — opening the gatefold — makes the reader’s understanding a bodily act, too. Smith’s use of pigments, granulation medium, and what he refers to as “potions” enact what the boy perceives and describes: by its own nature, clumping pigment has changed the flow of colour. “The artefact is doing what it’s talking about,” Smith said to me in the 2022 interview: medium here represents the theme of the book, not just its narrative.

In the video conversation submitted with this dossier, Scott, the author of *I Talk Like a River*, says, “People from some of the biggest stuttering organisations in the world tell me that this book essentially will change the lives of children who stutter.” He expresses what I try to articulate about Smith’s art in the paragraphs above in his own way: “The artwork for this book, it normalises disability in such a beautiful way because it just becomes part of the landscape. All those brushstrokes that you make,” he says to Smith, “all the attention to water and to light and to trauma and to pain — it’s just part of the world that we’re in; it’s not separate ... through the child’s perspective it becomes part of the ecosystem.” In this book, Smith’s extraordinary merging of the tactile and the visual, of bodily experience and inner feeling, of disability and landscape, is unique, revelatory, and liberating.

It is apt, given the themes of *I Talk Like a River*, that Smith describes his approach to illustration and story as the act of listening, but also as something the artist must fight for. “Image always represents a true interpretation of what’s happening,” he remarked to me. “Illustration has the ultimate power. You have to fight for it and work on it, until you see what’s there.” His profound attentiveness in listening and looking brings forth multi-faceted expressions of emotion and experience that seem to deepen in their subtlety as the viewer, child or adult, contemplates the pages. The invisible becomes visual — the slow emergence of realisation, intense feeling, or inner bodily pain — its complexity gaining luminous clarity in the process.

Deirdre Baker



Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Toronto

January 2023



Biography of Sydney Smith



“At a certain point, in the journey of an illustrator,

you come to an understanding that you are only as good as the collaboration between the text and image.”

“Illustrations can control how the story is read and can add weight to words or flip them upside down.

There’s a lot of power there.”

Sydney Smith, 3 September 2019 Interview for *Art of the Picture Book*

Sydney Smith was born in 1980 in rural Nova Scotia. He attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts (interdisciplinary) degree in 2006. After graduating, he resided in Halifax for a number of years, where he designed posters and album art for east-coast musicians and collaborated on the production of a musical short film, *Horska* (2013). He launched his career as an illustrator of children’s books when Nimbus Publishing commissioned him to illustrate republications of poet Sheree Fitch’s *Mabel Murple* (2010), *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen* (2011), and *Toes in My Nose: And Other Poems* (2012), and several years later for singer-songwriter Jill Barber’s *Music Is for Everyone* (2014).

Moving to Toronto, he was commissioned by Groundwood Books to illustrate the wordless *Sidewalk Flowers* (2015; conceived by award-winning Toronto poet JonArno Lawson). He was then inspired to write and illustrate his own book *Small in the City* (2019). Both these books won the Governor General’s Literary Award for Young People’s Literature — Illustrated Books. He continued and continues to illustrate books by a range of writers: Jo Ellen Bogart’s *The White Cat and the Monk* (2016), a finalist for the Governor General’s Literary Award; Joanne Schwartz’s *Town Is by the Sea* (2017), which received the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal; Kenneth Oppel’s *Inkling* (2018), a middle-grade graphic novel; and most recently, Jordan Scott’s *I Talk Like a River* (2020). His accolades include five *New York Times*/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children’s Books citations (2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020) and a *New York Times* Kids Notable (2018).

After six years in Toronto, he returned to Nova Scotia, where he now lives with his wife and two sons. He said in a 3 September 2019 interview that he continues to seek and recapture “moments of mindfulness and the sublime found in unremarkable places.”

His readers are looking forward to his next publication, *My Baba’s Garden*, written by Jordan Scott, to be published by Penguin Random House and Neal Porter Books/Holiday House in March 2023.

Ten Most Important Titles

Music Is for Everyone

Text by Jill Barber

(Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2014)

Smoot: A Rebellious Shadow

Text by Michelle Cuevas

(New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2017)

Grant and Tillie Go Walking

Text by Monica Kulling

(Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2015)

Town Is by the Sea

Text by Joanne Schwartz

(Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2017)

Sidewalk Flowers

Concept by JonArno Lawson

(Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2015)

Inkling

Text by Kenneth Oppel

(New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2018)

Canada Year by Year

Text by Elizabeth MacLeod

(Toronto: Kids Can Press, 2016)

Small in the City

Text by Sydney Smith

(New York: Neal Porter Books, 2019)

The White Cat and the Monk

Text by Jo Ellen Bogart

(Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2016)

I Talk Like a River

Text by Jordan Scott

(New York: Neal Porter Books, 2020)





Most Significant Titles

Sidewalk Flowers

Concept by JonArno Lawson

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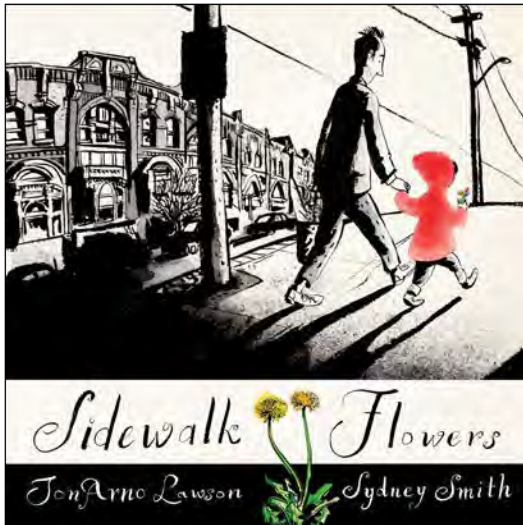


Sidewalk Flowers (2015)

Reviews

★ *School Library Journal*, STARRED REVIEW (Kiera Parrott)

An emotionally moving, visually delightful ode to the simple powers of observation and empathy. A young girl and her father walk home from the grocery store through busy city streets in this wordless picture book. Along the way, Dad is preoccupied — talking on his cell phone, moving with purpose, eyes forward — while his daughter, a bright spot of red in a mostly black-and-white world, gazes with curiosity at the sights around her. In graphic novel-style panels, readers see what she sees: colorful weeds and wildflowers springing up from cracks



in the pavement. She begins to collect these “sidewalk flowers” as they make their way past shops, across bustling avenues, and through a city park. Halfway through their journey, the little girl surreptitiously begins giving pieces of her bouquet away: a dandelion and some daffodils to a dead bird on a pathway; a sprig of lilac to an older man sleeping on a bench; daisies in the hair of her mother and siblings. With each not-so-random act of kindness, the scenes fill with more and more color, until the pen-and-ink drawings are awash in watercolor, her world now fully alive and vibrant. With pitch-perfect visual pacing, the narrative unfolds slowly, matched by the protagonist’s own leisurely appreciation of her environment. Smith expertly varies perspective, switching from bird’s-eye view to tightly focused close-ups. The panel format is

used exquisitely; the individual choices are purposeful, and the spaces between panels effectively move the story. VERDICT This is a book to savor slowly and then revisit again and again.

★ *Booklist*, STARRED REVIEW (Sarah Hunter)

A little girl in a red hooded jacket is walking with her dad on a gray street, but once she spots some dandelions growing out of a crack in the sidewalk, she starts to see wildflowers all over. Each time she notices some flowers, her father waits as she expands her bouquet. Now with a fistful of treasures, the girl decides to spread the cheer around. She places a few stems on a dead bird in the park, leaves some at the foot of a napping man, nestles a few in a dog’s collar, weaves several into her mom’s hair, and balances a few more atop her brother’s head before tucking the last one behind her ear. Smith expertly lays out the heartening narrative in wordless panels full of loose yet expressive ink-and-watercolor illustrations that subtly and lovingly capture the little girl’s joyful, breezy discovery of the wealth of color and nature around her. At first, the girl is the only speck of color in a world of inky black washes, but as she begins to notice flowers and birds all over town, Smith fills in her environment with rich and varied hues. A quiet, graceful book about the perspective-changing wonder of humble, everyday pleasures.



Awards & Accolades

American Library Association Notable Children's Book (2016)

Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Illustrator's Award (2016)

Best Book of the Year by Bank Street College of Education, *49th Shelf*, *Globe and Mail*, Goodreads, *Horn Book*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *National Post*, New York Public Library, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*

Booksource Scout Award for Favorite Picture Book (2015)

Cybils Award for Fiction Picture Book (2015)

Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver Canadian Picture Book Award, IBBY Canada (2015)

Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature — Illustrated Books (English) (2015)

IBBY Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities (2017)

National Cartoonists Society Reuben Award for Book Illustration (2016)

New York Times/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children's Books (2015)

MLA Mitten Award (2016)

Prix Libbylit for Best Picture Book (Belgium) (2015)

USBBY Outstanding International Book List (2016)

Shortlisted for:

Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award (2016)

NCTE Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children, Recommended (2016)

★ “A poignant, wordless storyline ... this ode to everyday beauty sings sweetly.”

Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW

★ “It's a reminder that what looks like play can sometimes be a sacrament.”

Publishers Weekly, STARRED REVIEW

★ “The book provides much for parents and kids to discuss, including death, cultural diversity, and the beauty that can be found in unexpected places ... *Sidewalk Flowers* wraps readers in kindness, tenderness, generosity, and wonder — things we can never have too much of.”

Quill & Quire, STARRED REVIEW (Cara Smusiak)

★ “*Sidewalk Flowers* is picture book perfection.”

Shelf Awareness, STARRED REVIEW (Emilie Coulter)

“It's wordless, but in this instance language would seem intrusive or didactic. The absence of text



seems to provide a more eloquent and nuanced story, one that allows children to freely share their perceptions of the narrative.”

New York Times (Carmela Ciuraru)

“A gentle wordless celebration of the true material of aliveness.”

Brain Pickings (Maria Popova)

“*Sidewalk Flowers* is an outstanding example of a wordless picture book.”

Canadian Review of Materials (Ellen Heaney)

“It’s a lovely, lyrical book — perfectly suited to conversation between parent or teacher and child, and something to remind all of us that the cold will end and flowers will bloom again.”

Montreal Gazette (Bernie Goedhart)

“There’s a reason folks are singing this book’s praises from Kalamazoo to Calgary. It’s a book that reminds you why we came up with the notion of wordless picture books in the first place. Affecting, efficient, moving, kind.”

School Library Journal blog *A Fuse #8 Production* (Elizabeth Bird)

Foreign Rights & Translations

Brazil: Editora Schwarcz

British Commonwealth: Walker Books

Chinese (Complex): Grimm Press

Chinese (Simplified): Dolphin Media

Czech: Mgr. Tomáš Brandejs

Dutch: Karmijn

Farsi: Fatemi Publishing

Film Option: Aircraft Pictures

French (Canada): Bayard Canada Livres

French (Europe): Éditions Sarbacane

German: Fischer

Greek: Ekdotike Athenon

Italian: Pulce Edizioni

Japanese: Poplar

Korean: Kookminbooks

Portuguese: Livros Horizonte

Spanish (Europe): Libros del Zorro Rojo

Spanish (Mexico): SM

Turkish: Kirmizi Kedi Yayıncılık Matbaacılık Reklam

Vietnamese: Kim Dong



The White Cat and the Monk (2016)

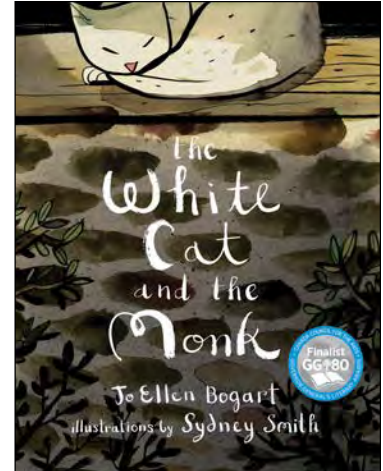
Reviews

New York Times (Maria Popova)

The White Cat and the Monk retells the ninth-century Old Irish poem “Pangur Bán” — a monk’s simple, sage meditation on the parallels between his scholarly lucubrations and his feline companion’s playful hunts. In the tiny candlelit home they share, each relishes the day’s rewards, delighting in but not competing with the other’s.

Sydney Smith’s distinctive art (he also illustrated the magnificent *Sidewalk Flowers*) falls partway between modernist fairy tale and graphic novel, opening an inviting portal between past and present as the ancient story comes to life in a decidedly contemporary aesthetic. Jo Ellen Bogart’s text stretches the poem past the length of most translations — surely necessary for turning a handful of verses into a book.

Indeed, it’s a marvelously inspired choice to make a picture book out of an ancient poem by a forgotten monk. The text’s subtle moral is timeless but also sings with elegiac timeliness — what a wonderful counterpoint to modern life’s hamster wheel of achievement and approval, this idea that there is poetry in every pursuit executed with purposefulness and savored with uncompetitive joy.



★ *School Library Journal*, STARRED REVIEW (Kiera Parrott)

On a dark night, a white cat enters an abbey, his lithe form slinking down the stone hallways until he spies a warm yellow light spilling out from under a doorway. Here, after several pages of wordless graphic novel-like panels, readers meet the titular monk, who welcomes the feline into his chambers as he works quietly and carefully, reading his illuminated manuscripts by candlelight. In spare prose gracefully adapted from the anonymous Irish poem, “Pangur Bán,” the monk connects his work with that of his pet, Pangur: “The silent hunter, he sits and stares at the wall. He studies the hole that leads to the mouse’s home. My own eyes, older and less bright than his, study my manuscript, hunting for meaning.” Smith, illustrator of *Sidewalk Flowers* (Groundwood, 2015), here again showcases his exquisite command of light and shadow — readers can almost see the candlelight flickering across the monk’s face and his spartan surroundings. Black ink and earth tone watercolors depict a cloistered and cozy interior; one full-bleed, full-page spread offers a close-up view of the monk’s gorgeously illustrated manuscripts featuring elaborate calligraphy, rainbow-colored embellishments, and clever integrations of the monk, Pangur, and their individual pursuits. The monk admits that “each page is a challenge,” offering young readers the ever-so-subtle message that learning and the search for truth can be difficult and require patience. So, too, does the cat’s pursuit of the mouse, which ends with the mouse snared in the patient predator’s needle claws. The joy Pangur feels when he at last captures his prey is compared to that of the monk, who finally finds the answer he was seeking just as the sun begins to rise. A final spread shows the contented cat watching the dawn of a new day, his human companion having finally found “light in the darkness.”

VERDICT A stunningly illustrated meditative ode to the simple joys of human-animal companionship and the pursuit of knowledge.

Awards & Accolades

Best Book of the Year from Bank Street College of Education, *Brain Pickings*,
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canadian Children's
Book Centre, *National Post*, *School Library Journal*

Cooperative Children's Book Center Choices List (2017)

NCTE Notable Poetry List (2017)

New York Times/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children's Books (2016)

USBBY Outstanding International Books List (2017)

Shortlisted for:

Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature —
Illustrated Books (English) (2016)

★ “The watercolor-and-ink artwork has both heft and humor,
especially in the joyful depictions of the manuscripts ... Readers who consider the story's underlying
messages about necessities, companionship, and fulfillment will come away enriched.”

Booklist, STARRED REVIEW

“The adaptation ... is as unostentatious as the watercolor-and-ink illustrations, which meld a medieval
spirit with a modern sense of cartooning, a juxtaposition that is fresh and seems entirely right.”

Horn Book



Foreign Rights & Translations

Australia: Walker Books

Chinese (Simplified): Beijing Tianlue Books

French (Europe): Kaléidoscope

Korean: Bir Publishing

New Zealand: Walker Books

United Kingdom: Walker Books

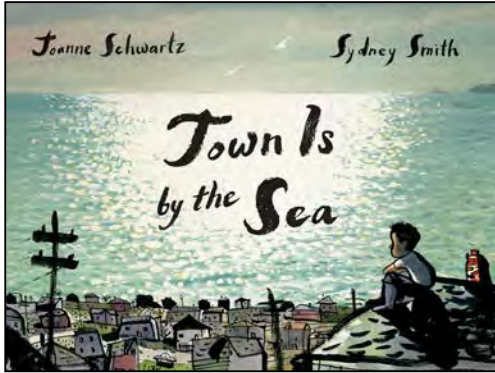


Town Is by the Sea (2017)

Reviews

New York Times (Maria Russo)

This quietly devastating book from Schwartz (*Pinny in Summer*) and Smith (*Sidewalk Flowers*, *The White Cat and the Monk*) stirs timeless, elemental emotions. An unnamed narrator takes us through his daily life in a picturesque, run-down seaside town in the 1950s. The boy plays and runs an errand for his mother; his father “works under the sea, deep down in the coal mines.” Smith’s unsettling juxtapositions — an ocean glints in the sun, men bend over in dark, smudgy mines — echo the boy’s poetic resignation to his own future as a miner.



★ *Booklist*, STARRED REVIEW (Lucinda Whitehurst)

In this atmospheric story, a young boy describes a day in his seaside town. As he details his experiences, his winsome descriptions of fresh salt air and the light shining on the sea stand in sharp contrast to the confined darkness of the coal mine where his father works.

Although nothing bad happens on this day, an unsettling sense of melancholy permeates the words and, especially, Smith’s paintings, which are rendered in rich, warm watercolors accented by thick, black ink. As the boy revels in the sunshine, he thinks of his father in darkness below. At one point, the miners recede from view, and the darkness encroaches on their narrow tunnel at the bottom of the page. In the next two-page spread, the boy visits the graveyard where his grandfather — who also was a miner — is buried. A picture of the calm, expansive sea, glittering with sunshine, is paired with a dark, empty mine, rendered in heavy, black scribbles. The tension is broken when the boy’s father appears in the door to their home, but the happy family dinner scene is haunted by a smear of darkness under the table, suggesting that anxiety never is completely removed. The boy’s somewhat wistful statements echo that feeling as he notes, “I think about the bright days of summer and the dark tunnels underground. One day it will be my turn. I’m a miner’s son.” Hauntingly beautiful.



Awards & Accolades

AALSC Notable Children's Book (2018)

Best Book of the Year from Bank Street College of Education, *BookPage*,
Cooperative Children's Book Center, Denver Public Library,
Horn Book Fanfare, *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*

Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Honor Book (2017)

CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal (2018)

Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration (2018)

New York Times/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children's Books (2017)

New York Times Notable Children's Book of 2017

TD Canadian Children's Literature Award (2018)



Shortlisted for:

Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature —
Illustrated Books (English) (2017)

Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award (2018)

★ “Art and text meld for a powerful glimpse at a way of life that begs inspection. A thoughtful and haunting book that will stay with readers.”

School Library Journal, STARRED REVIEW

★ “This is a moving story, and a fine example of text and pictures in perfect harmony.”

Horn Book, STARRED REVIEW

“Smith's expressive, evocative spreads contrast the light-soaked landscape above with the night-black mine below ... a sensitive way of helping readers understand that, for some, the idea of choosing a career is a luxury.”

Publishers Weekly

“This story ebbs and flows like the sea itself . . . one of the best illustrated books of the year . . . ”

Huffington Post

“Sydney's illustrations merge with my text as though they were made as one. They punctuate the rhythm, embellish the small moments, and reveal nuanced details and broad strokes. His spreads of sea and town and the dark underground are stunning. I can't thank him enough for his beautiful artistry.”

Author Joanne Schwartz, in her acceptance speech for
the *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Award (2017)

Foreign Rights & Translations

Audio (English): Recorded Books

Australia (English): Walker Books

Chinese (Complex): Global Kids

Chinese (Simplified): Dolphin Media

French (Europe): Rageot Editeur, Didier Jeunesse

French (North America): Comme des géants

German: Aladin Verlag

Italian: Pulce Edizioni

Japanese: BL Shuppan

Korean: Kookmin

New Zealand (English): Walker Books

Spanish: Ekare

Swedish: Epix

Turkish: Kirmizi Kedi Yayıncılık Matbaacılık Reklam

United Kingdom (English): Walker Books

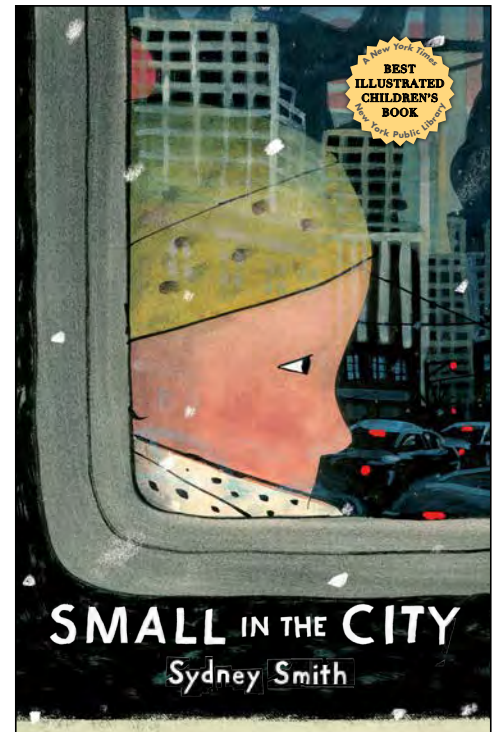
Vietnamese: Kim Dong

Small in the City (2019)

Reviews

★ *Horn Book* (Julie Danielson), STARRED REVIEW

In Smith's debut as both illustrator and author, an intrepid child on the move in the big city speaks directly to an unknown someone. After two wordless spreads (with panel illustrations featuring the child, in silhouette and profile, on a bus), the text begins. "I know what it's like to be small in the city ... If you want, I can give you some advice." A series of spreads follows in which the child wanders through the daunting wintry city and beyond, dispensing advice and encouragement ("Alleys can be good shortcuts. But don't go down this alley. It's too dark"). With full-bleed spreads juxtaposed with ones featuring small vignettes, Smith expertly communicates the city's chaos and bustle with line, color, and scale. Jagged, angular lines convey the danger of being small in a big place; dark grays and blacks reflect both the harsh winter and the child's worry; and huge skyscrapers emphasize the child's small size. The identity of the book's "you" is revealed only gradually, through the progressively specific advice the child dispenses ("I know you like to listen to music ... You could perch on the window ledge") and, eventually, through a poster the child tapes to a streetlight with a picture of a lost cat. There are signs of hope at the end, with new warm tones in the art as the child arrives home and with a final illustration featuring nearby paw-prints in the snow. This emotionally resonant ode to the resilience of small creatures in a big, loud world is tender and timeless — and a masterful merging of art and text.



Quill & Quire (Charis Cotter)

Small in the City tells the story of a child's vivid urban journey that is initially frightening, then familiar. This is the first time that award-winning illustrator Sydney Smith has created both the text and the illustrations in a picture book, and the result is a quiet tour de force.

A small child negotiates the streetcar, the busy streets, and the lurking dangers of a big city that is easily recognizable as Toronto. The boy (or girl — it's up to the reader to decide) is surrounded by noise, rushing cars, and confusing traffic lights. The city is overwhelming — but the child knows what to do and where to go. He rings the bell for his stop and descends into the crowd on the pavement, making his way through the sidewalks and skyscrapers. The child begins to comment on the sights around him, giving an unseen friend advice about how to find one's way through the city when one is very small — pointing out which alleys to avoid, which yards have angry dogs, which trees to climb. By the end of the book, the bustle of the city has retreated into the background, and we discover that the child is talking to someone even smaller than he is. The book ends with a heart-searing twist.

With his haunting artwork and sparse text, Smith has captured the perfect balance between fear and familiarity. This book reassures small children that they can find their way through their fears to a place of safety.

Smith's masterful illustrations begin with fuzzy images seen through a dirty streetcar window followed by dark, menacing snapshots representing the fragmentation and chaos of the city. Slowly, the pictures change to friendlier scenes and familiar landmarks. There is always a sense of movement — people, traffic, snow, and wind.

Like a fairy tale where the hero treads a dangerous path to find his way to order and happiness, *Small in the City* takes the reader through darkness into light. This is a lovely book, illuminating both the trepidation and growing confidence of a small child in a big city.

Awards & Accolades

American Library Association Notable Children's Book (2020)

Best Book of the Year from Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), *Booklist*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *Capitol Choices*, *Globe and Mail*, *Horn Book*, *Kirkus Reviews*, NPR, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, *Shelf Awareness*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*

CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal (2021)

Ezra Jack Keats Award for Writer (2020)

Governor General's Literary Award in Young People's Literature – Illustrated Books (English) (2019)

Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration (2020)

Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award (2020)

New York Times/New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children's Books (2019)

Sheila Barry Best Canadian Picture Book of the Year Award (2020)

Shortlisted for:

Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver Canadian Picture Book Award, IBBY Canada (2020)

"*Small in the City* is visually stunning. The feeling of winter in the city from a child's perspective is rendered with remarkable feeling and sensitivity. But the genius of the book turns on the collaboration of the pictures and the text — the voice, the pacing and the gentle but striking exposition live up to the brilliance of the illustrations. *A tour de force.*"

Governor General's Award Peer Assessment Committee
(Shauntay Grant, Jon Klassen, Kathryn Shoemaker)

"This story has one thinking of how we form a deep sense of belonging into the communities that we call home."

Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award jury

★ "A savvy kid, but *so* small within the double-page spread of skyscrapers, commuters, stoplights, and construction ... Hand-drawn frames, presented in quadrants, contain both powerful close-ups and wider scenes ... that mark time and distance. A page turn delivers full-page pictures of the looming city, with dizzying linework and detail. Cinematic scenes feel at once atmospheric and photorealistic ... This incisive language distills the hardest part of childhood: the precarious hold small people have on their own agency ... Extraordinary, emotional, and beautifully rendered."

Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW

"... brilliant and transporting ... a book about perspective and empathy ... the best picture book I've seen so far this year, and among the most moving I know. For the right child it will be revelatory."

New York Times Book Review (Bruce Hardy)



★ “The atmosphere will draw listeners in immediately ... and many youngsters will appreciate the recognition of how sensorily overwhelming a cityscape can be and the tips for finding smaller pools of quiet and respite.”

Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books, STARRED REVIEW (Deborah Stevenson)

★ “Smith’s understated portrait of longing for the return of a beloved family member takes readers on a quiet but powerful emotional journey, one whose intensity Smith tracks visually ... The story’s spotlight is not on the loss of the pet, or on its return, but on the state of suspension in between — a mixture of grief, resignation, and patient waiting — and the independent child narrator’s loving regard for the animal as an autonomous being.”

Publishers Weekly, STARRED REVIEW

★ “The use of line, reflection, and perspective masterfully evoke a bustling gray city, making this thoughtful book an artful choice for large collections.”

School Library Journal, STARRED REVIEW (Anna Haase Krueger)

“ ... a work of surpassing poignancy and understanding ... ”

Wall Street Journal (Meghan Cox Gurdon)

“Sydney Smith takes visual moments, fleeting glimpses, and fixes them to paper in a way that is extraordinary and beautiful. His adept uses of line and light and color deliver a quietly cinematic look at city streets ... Layers of empathy are revealed as the pages turn ... full of faith and compassion, and gorgeous to look at, as well.”

Washington Post (Kathie Meizner)

“ ... one of this fall’s most stunning picture books with a story told partly through Smith’s luminous ink, gouache and watercolour illustrations and partly through the lyrical text that takes us on a magical journey through snowy city streets.”

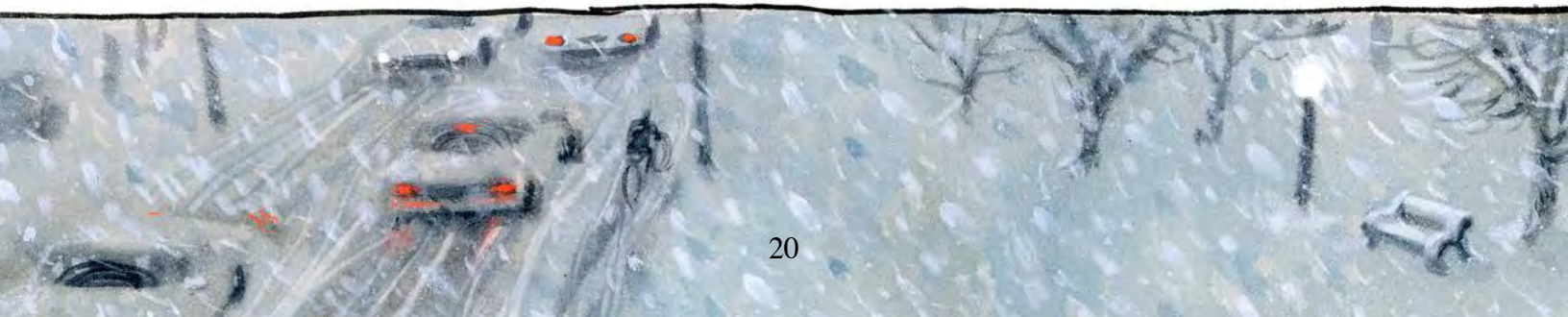
Globe and Mail (Jeffrey Canton)

“Sydney Smith knows that children are the ultimate observers. In *Small in the City*, he shows us how a young child navigates a city ... with deep knowledge of all its nooks and crannies. If we can find them and are lucky, there is shelter, kindness and hope. Smith renders an elegant urban winterscape precisely, yet with an astonishing looseness.”

New York Times / New York Public Library Best Illustrated Children’s Books (Jillian Tamaki)

★ “The straightforward text is juxtaposed against stirring artwork whose drama is heightened by the swirling snowstorm that permeates the pages. The ink, watercolor, and gouache pictures have a unique, sometimes startling look as they divide into strips or fill the pages ... Smith’s art has been award winning, but here he becomes author as well as illustrator. He does both titles proud in this stirring piece.”

Booklist, STARRED REVIEW (Ilene Cooper)





Foreign Rights & Translations

Audio and Iconographic Video: Dreamscape

British Commonwealth: Walker Books

Canada: Groundwood Books

Catalan: Libros del Zorro Rojo

Chinese (Complex): Gleaner Books

Chinese (Simplified): Everafter

Danish: Turbine

Dutch: Querido

French: Kaléidoscope

German: Thienemann

Italian: Orecchio Acerbo Editore

Japanese: Hyoronsha

Korean: Bear Books

Polish: Wydawnictwo Sto Stron

Portuguese: 20|20 Editora

Spanish: Libros del Zorro Rojo

Swedish: Lilla Pirat

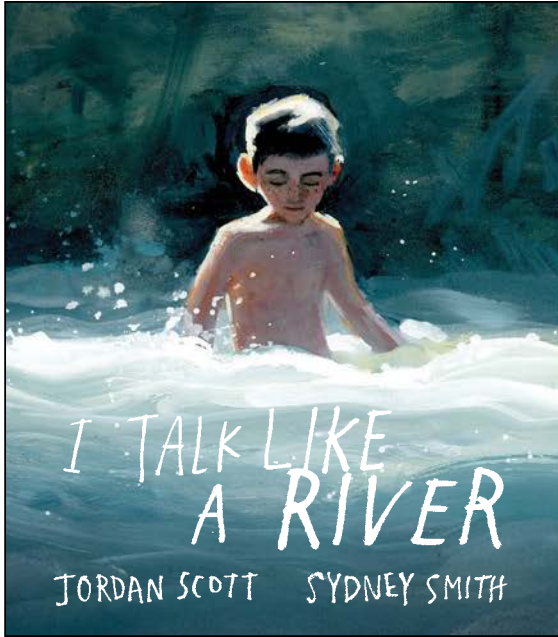
Turkish: Kirmizi Ked

I Talk Like A River (2020)

Reviews

New York Times Book Review (Craig Morgan Teicher)

According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, around three million Americans stutter, and 5 percent to 10 percent of children will develop a stutter in their lifetime. As a child, I did,



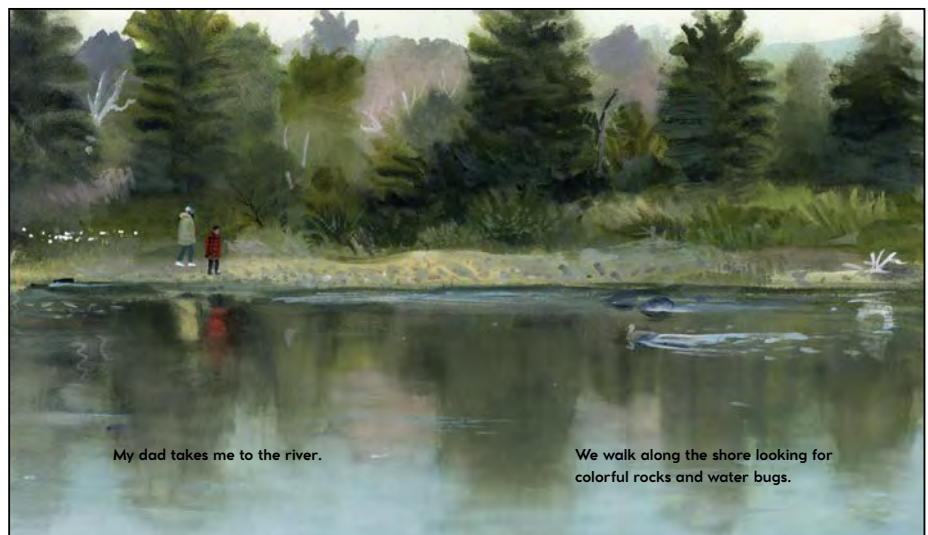
and still what I want to say sometimes feels as if it's trapped in a bubble I can't pop. My tongue loops around the stuck word or phrase, attempts alternate routes. I stare at the ceiling, begging patience with my eyes. A stutter, like other differences, can be frightening and painful because it threatens to isolate the stutterer. To a child, for whom social connection is paramount, this can be terrifying.

In "I Talk Like a River," the Canadian poet Jordan Scott recalls his own childhood struggle with stuttering. His episodic narrative, told in a few straightforward sentences per page, accompanied by gorgeous illustrations by Sydney Smith, is an empathetic conversation-starter for families seeking help for a young — or not so young — person who stutters. Scott looks 8 or 9 in Smith's renderings; freckled, with an intense, inward-looking gaze.

In the first pages, he stares out a window, contemplating his anxious relationship with words: "I wake up each morning with the sounds of words all around me./P for the pine tree outside my bedroom window./C for the crow in its branches." But this is no uplifting abecedary. The story follows Scott from shame and fear to a state not of "fluency," which implies a cure for stuttering, but, as he says in his short afterword, of self-acceptance and integration.

Smith has found a brilliant visual solution to show how stuttering creates a forced kind of, well, social distance. Working in generously applied water-based paints, he depicts people, rooms and nature with appealing warmth and precision, while also using the paint's capacity to spread, bleed, run and dissolve to figure the ways speech will and won't flow, and how the threat of being cut off can actually distort what the sufferer sees.

In the first pages, he stares out a window, contemplating his anxious relationship with words: "I wake up each morning



The most moving art accompanies Scott's admission that "when my teacher asks me a question, all my classmates turn and look." One illustration shows a soft, gummy vision of the classroom from the last row: the backs of the students' heads, the brush strokes of their hair, the patterns on their sweaters. This all shifts in a second picture, which is blurred, almost dirty, the students' indistinct faces turned menacingly toward the viewer, who sits in Scott's place and seems to be retreating into himself, the light in the room fading.

The story breathes a sigh of relief when the boy's father takes him to a nearby river, a metaphor and even a role model for how turbulence and eddying are all part of the natural flow. A particularly powerful gatefold showing Scott's troubled face across two pages opens out into a wide painting of him wading into the sun-speckled river, just as he is wading deliberately into the uneasy territory of his stutter.

Before we know it, two pages later, he is swimming: "When the words around me are hard to say, I think of the proud river, bubbling, churning, whirling and crashing." The painting on this page has a bit of everything that's come before: a shaded and shadowy body, bright flecks of bluish white to depict the water bounding against the boy's swimming strokes; greens, blues, grays and gentle reds, the colors of a challenging and beautiful life.

If I'd had a book like this as a kid, I would have been a lot less afraid to open my mouth. While it won't cure stuttering itself, "I Talk Like a River" may go a long way toward healing the sense of isolation that is among its most painful effects.

★ ***School Library Journal*, STARRED REVIEW (Kimberly Olson Fakh)**

In first-person narration about the author as a boy, this debut brings readers into the world of dysfluency, that is, stuttering. The narrator, a white boy, sits alone at the kitchen table before school, imagining how badly his day will go, and it's even worse. The letters M, P, and C bring special terrors for the garbled sounds they demand of him in a school day, when the teacher asks students to describe a favorite place. His solitude is, for readers, almost unbearable until he returns to his understanding father. He knows about a "bad speech day," and takes his son to the river. There, without many words, he explains how his son talks like the river, with ebbs and flows, a rush of sounds, emotion, and meaning streaming. The boy's dawning realization brings the story to a resonant pause, in a foldout that opens to a vast four-page spread of the sparkling waters that surround him. And then the remembrance resumes, for when he returns to school, he talks about his special place in his own manner, his dysfluency making him and his telling unique. Smith's lyrical, color-saturated paintings capture mighty nature



as well as the blurred, staring faces of schoolmates, who mock and laugh but mostly do not understand the main character's inner world. An author's note, in tiny type but very personal and expressive, outlines the journey Scott has taken to make peace with himself.

VERDICT By turns heartbreaking and illuminating, this picture book brings one more outsider into the fold through economy of language and an abundance of love.

Awards & Accolades

American Library Association Notable Children's Book (2021)
Best Book of the Year from Bank Street College of Education,
BookPage, Children's Book Council, *Globe and Mail*, Chicago
Public Library, *Horn Book* Fanfare, *Kirkus Reviews*, *New
York Times*, NPR, *People* magazine, *Publishers Weekly*, *School
Library Journal*, *Shelf Awareness*, *Wall Street Journal*

Boston Globe-Horn Book Award (2021)

Charlotte Zolotow Award Honor Book (2021–2022)

Christie Harris Illustrated Children's Literature Prize (2021)

International Literacy Association Primary Fiction Honor Book (2021)

Schneider Family Book Award (2021)



Shortlisted for:

Children's Book Council Kids' Book Choice Award, Finalist (2021)

CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal (2022)

Governor General's Literary Award in Young People's Literature – Illustrated Books (English) (2020)

★ “An astounding articulation of both what it feels like to be different and how to make peace with it.”

Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Artwork makes the internal change a light-filled experience, an account of the moment in which the child experiences himself and his individual way of speaking as part of the great forces of the natural world.”

Publishers Weekly, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Smith's watercolor, ink, and gouache illustrations echo the story's contemplative mood ... Full of reassurance and understanding, this is a much-needed look at a common language problem.”

Booklist, STARRED REVIEW (Kay Weisman)

★ “An important and unforgettable offering presented with natural beauty and grace.”

Horn Book, STARRED REVIEW (Luann Toth)

★ “This is unquestionably one of the best picture books of 2020.”

BookPage, STARRED REVIEW (Julie Danielson)

★ “‘I talk about the river. And I talk like the river,’ he says — sentences that choke me up each time I read them.”

Quill & Quire, STARRED REVIEW (Emily Donaldson)

★ “Sydney Smith’s astonishing watercolor, ink and gouache art illuminates what is written, and what lies beneath. The impressionistic paintings bring readers close to the boy’s pain and allow them to experience, seemingly firsthand, his solace, too.”

Shelf Awareness, STARRED REVIEW (Lynn Becker)

“This wrenching and beautiful book will give succor to children who stutter and expand the hearts of those lucky enough to take fluency for granted.”

Wall Street Journal (Meghan Cox Gurdon)

“This important (and stunning) book promotes self-acceptance . . . as well as empathy.”

San Francisco Chronicle (Susan Faust)

“One of the most powerful books that I’ve read in 2020 . . . Scott’s loving and lyrical text is made real through Smith’s illustrations, which shimmer with emotion and make readers feel that they’re truly seeing the world that Scott describes.”

Globe and Mail (Jeffrey Canton)

“Deft poetic language pairs with the resonant watercolors of Sydney Smith to create a book that is more than a memoir and more than conveying a message. This is pain, turned into art, and written for young children. Incomparable.”

School Library Journal blog *A Fuse #8 Production* (Elizabeth Bird)

“A sensitive portrayal of the isolation and stigma felt by a kid with speech difficulties. Smith sets the mood deftly with smoky, textured watercolor and gouache art that moves from choppy panels as our narrator tries to negotiate the verbal world to fluid, dappled full-page and double-page images when the river’s majesty takes over.”

Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books (Deborah Stevenson)

“Smith’s turbulent blues, brief glimpses of the boy’s face, and serene riverscapes convey emotion, beauty, and respect. An exceptional work.”

Toronto Star (Deirdre Baker)

Foreign Rights & Translations

Audio and Iconographic Video: Dreamscape

British Commonwealth: Walker Books

Catalan: Libros del Zorro Rojo

Chinese (Complex): Gleaner Books

Chinese (Simplified): Beijing Cheerful

Dutch: Querido

French: Didier Jeunesse

French (North America): Comme des géants

German: Thienemann

Greek: Mikri Selini

Italian: Orecchio Acerbo

Japanese: Kaiseisha

Korean: Bear Books

Macedonian: Templum

Portuguese: 20 | 20 Editora

Portuguese (Brazil): Pequena Zahar

Slovenian: Morfemplus

Spanish: Libros del Zorro Rojo

Swedish: Lilla Pirat

Turkish: Kirmizi Kedi



On Sydney Smith

**Sue Corbett, “Smith in the Country,
Small in the City”**

***Publishers Weekly* (5 September 2019)**

After six years in Toronto, illustrator Sydney Smith has moved back to Nova Scotia, where he grew up in a small town south of the provincial capital of Halifax. He did not come home empty handed. (A Halifax bookstore advertising a signing dubbed him their “local art hero.”) In addition to the slew of starred reviews and prestigious awards he collected while living in Ontario’s biggest city, Smith also brought home a manuscript, *Small in the City* (Holiday House/Porter), the first book he has both written and illustrated.



*In Conversation: Sydney Smith, Jordan Scott,
Neal Porter (January 2023)*

“It took a little while to write my first story because I’m not super familiar with my own voice or how I wanted to sound,” said Smith, whose books have won the U.K.’s Kate Greenaway Medal, a *Boston Globe–Horn Book* Award, and multiple Best Illustrated citations from the *New York Times*. “I played around quite a bit but I knew there were certain anchors I wanted to keep. I wanted it to be set in a snowstorm. I loved the idea of the city changing and becoming quiet as the snow falls.”

Small in the City contains multiple mysteries, beginning with the gender of the narrator, a deliberately androgynous child who exits a public bus bundled up beneath hat, scarf, and winter overcoat. “I’m not trying to grandstand or make any sort of statement, but I’m not going to say if it’s a boy or a girl,” Smith said. “I like the ambiguity.”

The plot is propelled by an uneasy tension — is this child homeless? Hungry? Who is the assured dialogue directed at? — with a narrative twist that upends what the reader probably thought the story was about. “My own mother said, ‘Oh, I *think* I get it,’” Smith said, with a laugh. “But when you provide a challenge to a reader, it’s a way more rewarding read because you trusted them to put the clues together and figure out what’s going on.”

What Smith will say definitively about his authorial debut is that the story is about loss. “Adults think they have a monopoly on heartbreak and they don’t,” he said. “Children lose things all the time and are told to suck it up or put off feeling bad, but it’s hard to be asked as a child to be mature or be understanding when all you want to do is to express the pain you feel.”

Neal Porter made the book one of his first acquisitions for his imprint at Holiday House, securing world rights (excluding Canada) in a seven-house auction in 2018. Canadian rights were acquired by Sheila



Barry at Groundwood Books. Barry published Smith's breakout book, the wordless picture book *Sidewalk Flowers* (conceived by JonArno Lawson) and Smith's other Groundwood titles — *Grant and Tillie Go Walking* by Monica Kulling, *The White Cat and the Monk* by Jo Ellen Bogart, and *Town Is by the Sea* by Joanne Schwartz. *Small in the City* will be the first of Smith's picture books not to be edited by Barry, who served as a mentor, editor, and friend to the illustrator.

"I was developing [*Small in the City*] around the time she told me she had cancer," he recalled. "She was going through chemo but she really didn't seem sick. She still had the same energy and positivity." Barry died in November 2017, just a few months after her diagnosis. "It was fast. It was a huge shock," Smith said. *Small in the City* is dedicated to her.

"It felt really hard to move on from [Groundwood], which had been such a supportive family to me. But I definitely had Sheila's blessing to go and work with Neal because she knew he works exactly the same way she did," he said. "He gives you a lot of freedom to make your own choices."

Small in the City has already received five starred reviews, as well as the Society of Illustrators Silver Medal. "That is enough to sustain me for a long time," Smith said.

The move back to Nova Scotia was occasioned by the birth of Smith's second child in February. "We felt like we were at the limits with one kid in the city," he said. Both he and his wife, Maggie, are from Nova Scotia. "We have family here and we missed them but they were also eager to be a part of our kids' lives." *Small in the City* then became more than just another book, he said. A story about profound loss, an album of images reflecting the life they were leaving behind. "It's our neighborhood but not so specific that it can't be any city. There are street cars but there's no CN Tower," Smith said. "I wanted it to be a bit universal but, if anything, it's a document of our time in Toronto."



Antonia Saxon, “The Three-Way Collaboration behind ‘I Talk Like a River’”

***Publishers Weekly* (13 August 2020)**

Canadian writer Jordan Scott remembers a trip to the river that he and his father took one day when he was still a boy. He was in primary school in British Columbia and his classmates could be cruel about the stutter that made his speech different. They stared. They giggled. His father came to pick him up early and they drove to the Fraser River, which churns through the landscape on its way to the Pacific. He and his father didn’t talk much, but as they looked out at the water his father said something that stayed with Scott. “See how that water moves?” his father told him. “That’s how you speak.”

In likening Scott’s speech to the powerful, unpredictable energy of water over stones, his father’s words released a knotted-up place inside him. Scott, now a poet, tells the story of that day in his new picture book *I Talk Like a River*, out next month from Holiday House’s Neal Porter Books imprint. The story ends with a moment of joy as the child goes back to school the next day and tells the class about the river, his favorite place in the world. The stutter is still there, but his speech is his own, with its own force and distinctive movement. “I talk about the river. And I talk like the river,” Scott’s story ends. “For me,” he explained, “it was really important to have the child go back and talk the way he’s going to talk. There was always this idea that you had to *overcome* the stutter, you had to speak fluently — that was the goal. The last line was a very important part of the book for me. The defiance at the end of it.” ...



[Porter’s] response was immediate. “My litmus test these days is, ‘Do I have to publish this book?’ And the answer was an emphatic ‘Yes!’”

“In one of the first conversations I had with Neal [Porter],” Scott recalled, “he said, ‘This book is for everyone who has a hard time expressing themselves, who has a hard time speaking.’ The stutter acts as an extreme example of the kind of lack of fluency that we all share, difficulties with expression in social spaces, and accepting that which is perceived as different.”

Porter had a second impulse on reading the manuscript. “I wanted Sydney [Smith] to illustrate it.” Porter and Smith had just finished working on the Ezra Jack Keats award-winning picture book *Small in the City*, which came out last fall. “It took a little bit of arm-twisting,” Porter said. “He’s a thoughtful guy and he had already begun thinking about his next written and illustrated book. I asked him to take a pause.”

Reading the story persuaded Smith to shift his plans. “I wanted to do it justice,” he said. One of the first things he did was to contact Scott. “I breached that wall, that code of silence between author and illustrator. I knew this was his first picture book. And I had been in touch with Neal and he was fine with it.” The two met in a Toronto coffee shop and talked for two hours. “I brought some sketches. He was very gracious. Some people have a specific idea of what their story is going to look like. Jordan was open to anything.”

An “Electric Current” of Collaboration

The collaboration became a three-way relationship: writer working with artist, editor with writer, editor with artist. “It was one of the great publishing experiences of my career,” Porter said. “It was inspiring, and it was also

a hell of a lot of fun. There was an enthusiastic and electric current circulating among all three of us.” ...

Meanwhile, Porter and Smith were in constant touch. “I have such a shaky ego that I need some excitement,” Smith said, “and Neal was definitely a good source of excitement. What was scary, a little bit of a risk, was working with no ink line.” Smith’s expressive black line has been a signature feature of his artwork. His paintings for *I Talk Like a River* — especially the early spreads that show the boy at home and in school — use murky wash to convey brooding and anxiety. “There’s a lot of liquid,” he said. “It’s loose and washy but it’s also very messy. The panels are off-center; they’re all kind of falling off the page a little bit. Nothing was supposed to feel very confident. There’s a lot of stuff that I don’t know how it happened.”

After Smith got further into the project, he and Porter met in Toronto (Smith has since moved to Halifax). “I didn’t get to meet Jordan,” Porter said, “but I did go up to Toronto when Sydney was still there, and we had a memorable meeting, also in a coffee bar. Sydney had lots of images scattered over this long communal table and we sort of went at it, arranging and rearranging, trying to find the thread through the story — ‘This one, not that one.’”

Smith felt that the paintings he was doing often turned out better when he didn’t have to rework them. “I found in the past that there’s something really magical about those first sketches. They can embody a lot of the impressionistic, improvisational spirit of art-making and the second version, the third version, loses that. The central image, the painting where he’s standing in the river, there was just one version. And Neal was really open to that as well.”

A striking gatefold spread represents the moment the boy begins to think of himself in a new way. “It’s literally going inside the boy’s head and seeing what he sees,” Porter said. The closed pages show the boy’s face in tight closeup as he looks at the river “bubbling, churning, whirling, and crashing.” Then the gatefold opens wide, revealing the great, broad expanse of the river, its surface glinting in the sun, the boy plowing through the current, freedom and space all around him.

Smith recalled when he pitched the idea of doing a gatefold to Porter, telling him, “This probably won’t work, but I really like the idea of opening up the head of the character.” Porter was initially doubtful: “Do you think we really need it?” he asked.

“Then I saw him at a conference in Pittsburgh,” Smith remembered, “and he said, ‘That gatefold idea ... I can’t get it out of my head.’ They decided to go ahead with it. ‘Once you open it,’ Smith said, “it’s such a contrast to the darkness of the face. It’s color and light.”

Scott saw Smith’s painting as a natural extension of his poetic attempts to represent stuttering. “When I first started reading poetry,” the writer said, “poets would signal a stutter with a simple repetition of a syllable — ‘s-s-snake.’ I thought that kind of simple graphic representation was not adequate. I’ve always been trying to create the stutter internally. When I opened up the book for the first time and saw what Sydney had done — he took the concept of the stutter and made it part of the landscape.”

“The moment that I fully understood the story,” Smith said, “was when [Jordan and I] were talking in the coffee shop. It’s at the point when the character realizes that *they’re not broken*, that they’re not unnatural — that they’re perfect the way they are — that it all sort of fell into place. This is beautiful and powerful and liberating. And at that moment I felt ready to take on the book.



Complete Bibliography

2009

The Dread Crew: Pirates of the Backwoods

Middle grade fiction

Text by Kate Inglis, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2010

Mabel Murple

Poetry

Text by Sheree Fitch, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2011

There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen

Poetry

Text by Sheree Fitch, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2012

Toes in My Nose: And Other Poems

Poetry

Text by Sheree Fitch, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2014

The Flight of the Griffons

Middle grade fiction

Text by Kate Inglis, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2014

Music Is for Everyone

Picture book

Text by Jill Barber, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Nimbus Publishing: Halifax, Canada

2015

Grant and Tillie Go Walking

Picture book

Text by Monica Kulling, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Groundwood Books: Toronto, Canada

2015

Sidewalk Flowers

Picture book

Concept by JonArno Lawson, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Groundwood Books: Toronto, Canada

2016

Canada Year by Year

Middle grade non-fiction

Text by Elizabeth MacLeod, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Kids Can Press: Toronto, Canada

2016

Look Out for the Fitzgerald-Trouts

Middle grade fiction

Text by Esta Spalding, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Little, Brown Books for Young Readers: New York, United States

2016

The White Cat and the Monk

Picture book

Text by Jo Ellen Bogart, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Groundwood Books: Toronto, Canada

2017

Knock About with the Fitzgerald-Trouts

Middle grade fiction

Text by Esta Spalding, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Little, Brown Books for Young Readers: New York, United States

2017

Smoot: A Rebellious Shadow

Picture book

Text by Michelle Cuevas, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Dial Books for Young Readers: New York, United States

2017

Town Is by the Sea

Picture book

Text by Joanne Schwartz, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Groundwood Books: Toronto, Canada

2018

Inkling

Graphic novel

Text by Kenneth Oppel, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Knopf Books for Young Readers: New York, United States

2019

Small in the City

Picture book

Text and illustrations by Sydney Smith
Neal Porter Books: New York, United States

2020

I Talk Like a River

Picture book

Text by Jordan Scott, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Neal Porter Books: New York, United States

2023

My Baba's Garden

Picture book

Text by Jordan Scott, Illustrations by Sydney Smith
Neal Porter Books: New York, United States



Other Awards & Accolades

The Dread Crew

Shortlisted for:

Hackmatack Children's Choice Book Award for English Fiction (2011–2012)

Music Is for Everyone

“Sydney Smith’s charming watercolour illustrations capture many different moods. While singing a ‘lullaby/As soft as a petal,’ a red-rose haired little girl gently cradles a kitten. Swathed in swirls of blankets, she looks like a delicate, blossoming flower. On the facing page, an abstract scene depicts a heavy metal sound, with blasts of cool, dark colours and shapes ... *Music Is for Everyone* shows how music brings people closer together. The busy, joyful scenes are full of multicultural children with diverse backgrounds and abilities all joining together in song. Perfect for storytime, this musical hit parade strikes all the right chords.”

National Reading Campaign

Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration (2015)

Shortlisted for:

Red Cedar Book Awards

Grant and Tillie Go Walking

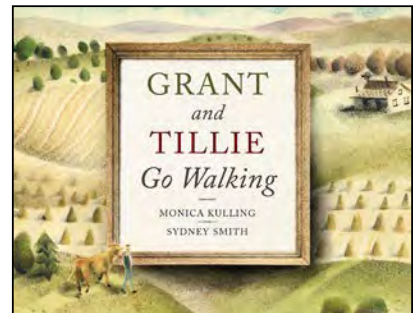
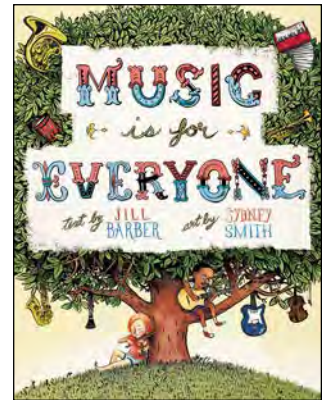
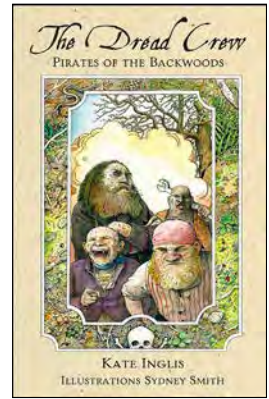
“A heartfelt, visually pleasing, and informative read inspired by an artist’s love for his home.”

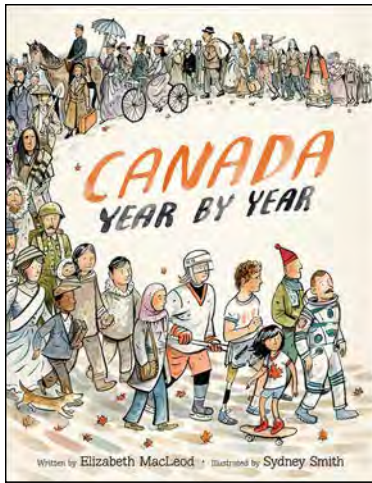
Booklist

“Using watercolours, ink, and a toothbrush, illustrator Sydney Smith mimics Grant’s style, bringing Kulling’s story of friendship, home, and ambition to life with an understated softness.”

National Post

Best Books for Kids & Teens, Canadian Children’s Book Centre (2016)





Canada Year by Year

“Revelatory and entertaining.”

Kirkus Reviews

“... this colorful book will be a useful addition to libraries on both sides of the border.”

Booklist

“An excellent overview of Canadian history and culture, perfect for browsing or for research.”

School Library Journal

“With such rich information complemented by its appealing visuals, children, adults, residents of Canada — old and new — and non-residents, will each find Canada’s unique story engaging.”

Canadian Children’s Book News

“Interesting, educational and entertaining, *Canada Year by Year* has a place in every public school and library.”

Canadian Review of Materials

Best Books for Kids & Teens, Canadian Children’s Book Centre (2017)

Norma Fleck Award for Canadian Children’s Non-Fiction (2017)

Quill & Quire Kids Books of the Year (2016)

Shortlisted for:

Children’s Literature Roundtables of Canada Information Book Award (2017)



Look Out for the Fitzgerald-Trouts

“These kids are witty, full of heart and genuinely fun to read about.”

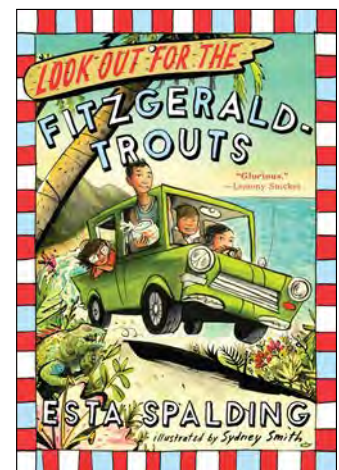
New York Times Book Review

“If the story’s magic lies in its Dahl-esque approach to topics like homelessness and parental neglect, its heart lies in the relationship between these four mutually devoted children.”

Publisher’s Weekly

“A touch of *Everything on a Waffle* weirdness; a touch of *The Willoughbys* sendup; and a warm, genial, wholly original voice.”

Horn Book



“If this sounds like the set up for a preposterous tale that incorporates a fantastical plot, quirky characters, and some child-friendly amorality, that’s because *Look Out for the Fitzgerald-Trouts* is exactly that and more ... This is plain fun with an edge, after a Dahl-esque fashion.”

Quill & Quire

Knock About with the Fitzgerald-Trouts

“Witty, full of heart and genuinely fun to read ... a wacky, lighthearted romp.”

New York Times Book Review

“It’s goofy, sweet, and buoyant with good will—Pippi Longstocking for our more hyperactive times.”

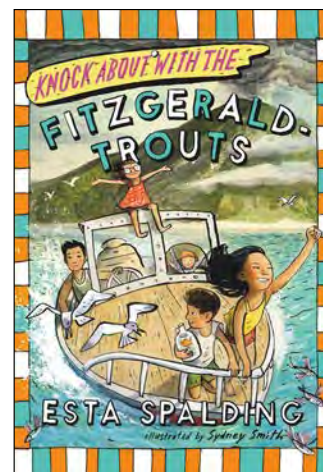
Horn Book

“Spunk, spirit, and ingenuity only begin to describe these fascinating children.”

School Library Journal

“With quick chapters, a compelling mystery, clever kid characters, and humorous antics galore, this lighthearted, cheer-worthy adventure should find an easy audience among middle-grade readers.”

Booklist



Smoot: A Rebellious Shadow

★ “Smith has a keen understanding of the power of the contrast between blackness and color ... Not since Peter Pan’s has a shadow commanded such well-deserved attention.”

Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Smith’s inky shadows and bright watercolor washes are imbued with lively movement, which perfectly capture Smoot’s boundless energy. Inspiring without being at all sappy, Smoot’s rebellion produces rich results.”

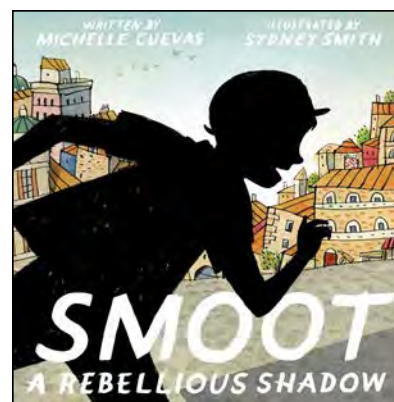
Booklist, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Smith’s shadows are vibrant and striking when juxtaposed with the real-world setting. The lines and colours in the non-shadow world are lithe and angled; the cityscapes are especially impressive and rich with tactile details in all the surfaces of stone, brick, and wood. By contrast, Smith’s shadow pictures appear hasty, spontaneous, and joyful.”

Quill & Quire, STARRED REVIEW

“Smith’s loose line and fluid ink and watercolors perfectly capture the ever-so-slightly mischievous and joyful tone of Cuevas’s text ... Young readers will be hooked by the beguiling premise and respond to the gently delivered message about living life with intention and imagination.”

School Library Journal



“Masterful ink and watercolor illustrations. Constant visual shifts among full-page spreads, paneled layouts, spot art, varying perspectives, and wordless scenes are seamless, engaging, and full of impact. A modern fairy tale (of sorts) that, although about a shadow, visually shines.”

Horn Book

Best Books for Kids & Teens, Canadian Children’s Book Centre (2018)

New York Public Library Best Books for Kids 2017



Inkling

★ “This masterful novel is funny, sad, and profound all at once ... a tender story about art, love, loss, and healing.”

Quill & Quire, STARRED REVIEW

“Astonishing ... With each page, we feel Ethan’s tension growing, his father’s anxieties looming larger and larger.”

New York Times Book Review

“A unique story about the creative process and the journey through grief.”

School Library Journal

“A sweet and funny story about an unusual friendship.”

Kirkus Reviews

“Highly engrossing, stunningly imaginative ... A masterpiece.”

Canadian Review of Materials

Junior Library Guild selection

Best Book of the Year from Amazon.com; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), New York Public Library,

New York Times, *Quill & Quire*

Parents’ Choice Recommended

Sunshine State Young Readers Award Books — 2020–2021 List for Grades 3–5

Shortlisted for:

Beehive Book Awards (2021)

Cybils Award (2018)

Diamond Willow Award (2019)

Maine Student Book Award (2019)

Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award (2019–2020)

Rhode Island Children’s Book Award (2021)

Silver Birch Award (2020)

Sundogs Award (2020)

Red Cedar Book Award (2020)

Rocky Mountain Book Award (2020)



Other Foreign Rights & Translations

Canada Year by Year

French (North America): Bayard Canada Livres

Grant and Tillie Go Walking

Chinese (Simplified): Oriental Babies and Kids Limited

Inkling

Canada: HarperCollins Canada

Italian: Rizzoli

Turkey: Kirmizi Kedi Yayinevi

United Kingdom: Walker Books

Knock About with the Fitzgerald-Trouts

Canada: Tundra Books

Look Out for the Fitzgerald-Trouts

Canada: Tundra Books

Italian: Il Castoro

Smoot: A Rebellious Shadow

Canada: Tundra Books

Chinese (Complex): The Eastern Publishing

Chinese (Simplified): Dolphin

German: Jacoby & Stuart

Italian: DeAgostini

Japanese: BL Publishing

Korean: Bear Books

Spanish and Catalan: Juventud



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