

First Opinion: The Illustration Is Mightier than the Harpoon: The Power of Imaginary in Emotion

Turk, Evan. *Heartbeat*. Atheneum, 2018.

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Heartbeat is a beautifully illustrated picture book by Evan Turk that tells a story of love and hope while interweaving the realities of loss, loneliness and greed that infuse the fragile relationship between mankind and whales. Turk wrote *Heartbeat* after spending time on the *Charles W. Morgan*, the last wooden whaling ship that has been restored for the purpose of educating the public about whales.

In this review, we focus on the aesthetic power of Turk's vibrant illustrations and sparse text that create an open abstract story with an intense emotional tone. The story of *Heartbeat* revolves around the life of a whale and her baby who are connected through their heartbeats and their unified song as they swim in their luminous ocean home. One day, whalers kill the mother for the resources her body provides. After the mother's death, we follow the baby through a life of despair, while Turk simultaneously shows us all the advancements the mother's body provides humankind with.

Turk uses his artistic style to evoke deep feelings. This is evident as we open the book and see a bright close-up of the whale's heartbeat. Through the placement of ellipsis after the words 'heart' and 'beat', he enables readers to sense the pulse of the heartbeat. The soft blues of the whale exploring the ocean elicit a calming effect. When the whale becomes pregnant, the ocean lights up reflecting her aura. As the baby whale enters this peaceful environment, the two whales sing together. The songs swirl around the ocean in flowing blue and red lines as we see the whales playfully swimming through the colorful mist. As we turn the page, this beautiful place of serenity, peace and happiness is violently disrupted by an empty, harsh

white space that rips through the mother's body. The ocean has turned black, as has part of the whale's body, and we see the life draining out of her. Turk uses cut out pieces of paper to create this void-like effect. The paper is juxtaposed against the smooth strokes of his paintings to depict the harsh and violent entrance of the humans into the whales' sanctuary.

Sharp, white spaces appear on the next page as Turk continues to draw us into the emotions of the suffering whales by changing the position, font size, and color of the text. The chaotic scene and the frantic heartbeat radiates the fear of both whales as the page is drained of color. The whales are drawn in chalky white when the sharply drawn edges of the harpoon barely miss the baby whale. We feel the baby whale's anguish and fear in the vast blackness of the next two pages, only seeing a faint beating of its heart. The baby whale swims through the blackness singing for its mother but there is no response. There is now a black hole in place of its once-filled heart accompanied only by a lone song. Looming in the page gutter is a dark, black, ship outlined in chalk. The baby whale breaks the surface as the mother is being hoisted out of the water. The mother has turned a dull white, completely empty of color and dimension. The baby whale continues to sing its eerie, empty song hoping to bring life back into its mother. Turk now depicts the once vibrant, colorful song with a few white flowing lines.

Waiting in the ship's harbor, the baby whale becomes an onlooker as the mother whale's body is processed into one candle, a hundred, a thousand, and then millions of lights for the human world. Turk effectively uses lighted candles to symbolize the loss of thousands of whales and disruption of their familial bonds for the sake of enhancing the lives of generations of human beings. Time and space seem to overlap as the wars of the world escalate, and human advancement and new technologies are developed. The pale semi translucent baby whale floats by bearing witness to all these advanced human developments such as a lubricant in the industrial revolution.

At the end, the story jumps forward two hundred years. Joy and life seep back into the somber pages with the arrival of a vibrant purple child listening to the melancholy of the whale's song. She is standing on the bow of a cruise ship with a sad but curious expression, surrounded by a sea of colorless indifferent people. Turk offers readers a thread of hope for a renewed relationship between whales and humans as the girl's heart begins to glow a radiant gold and her voice joins the whales in a familiar mixture of colors. We feel the optimism grow, as more hearts and voices engage and expand replacing the void in the whale's heart.

This is not a book for the faint of heart. Turk envelopes readers in the beauty and pain of the life of whales as humans continue to hunt them. The sparse text does not offer the lilt and cadence that is more typical of narrative which provides a sense of comfort and familiarity for readers. Rather the text and illustrations jar us, pulling us into difficult places and finally asking us to join the young girl at the end of the story and sing with the whales.

Works Cited

- Nikolajeva, Maria, & Carole Scott. *How Picture Books Work*. Routledge, 2000.
Turk, Evan. *Heartbeat*. Atheneum, 2018.