

Second Reaction: Sit with Me: Exploring Ecological Empathy through Evan Turk's *Heartbeat*

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

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In a search for books related to the environment, the beautiful illustration on the cover of this semi-wordless book caught my eye. *Heartbeat* by Evan Turk takes readers on a fragile oceanic journey through time. According to Turk, "It is a story about empathy, and about our relationship to the environment, and to each other" (Turk 2018). Turk uses the heartbeat to establish empathy and convey the connection between whales and humans. The complex themes presented in *Heartbeat* pull children and adults together to jointly navigate and comprehend the various layers of meaning.

My first reading of the book gave me a superficial understanding of the whales' plight during the height of commercial whaling. However, after reading the author's note at the end of the book, I gained a deeper appreciation for the ways in which whales furthered human society. For example, halfway through the book the baby whale travels through space and time in a dream-like state, witnessing all the advancements a whale's body provided to humans. The illustrations are dark and overlapping; a closer look at one image reveals rudimentary whale bodies streaming through the inside of a machine gun to signify the oil that was used as a lubricant during WWI. Before reading this book, I knew commercial whaling had rendered some species endangered, but I did not know the extent to which humans depended on whales or the brutality involved in hunting them.

When I shared this book with my animal loving, conservation-minded children, I was certain they would appreciate the beautiful illustrations and theme, but I realized they would need

my guidance. My children—ages, thirteen, ten and eight—loved the initial part of the story when the mother and baby whale were enjoying their time in the ocean together. However, they all tensed up beside me when this blissful scene was suddenly interrupted by a harpoon ripping through the ocean and through the mother whale's body draining each of color.

My children had a visceral reaction to this event, and we spent a significant amount of time discussing their feelings about the scene. They wondered how anyone could be callous enough to kill a mother whale. My sweet ten-year-old said, "Whales are like us and they should be allowed to live a full life, *JUST* like us." His emphasis on the word 'just' demonstrates his passion for fairness, especially for the treatment of animals. "This book is really sad", my thirteen-year-old told me. His empathetic reaction was focused on the mother whale being killed while the baby whale watched. After the mother's death, the baby whale spends four full pages wandering the dark ocean emanating panic, fear, isolation and despair.

As we continued reading, we paused again on the pages that depict advancements in human technology. I let my children explore the images of technology made possible through the sacrifice of whales. They were quick to recognize the whale shaped bombs being dropped, but I had to point out the smaller whales orbiting the satellite—whale oil was used in the process of recording images of the moon. They did not understand the significance of some illustrations until I explained it to them and read the commentary in the author's note, which provides useful detail.

My children were relieved when the story took a positive turn and a girl on the bow of the ship noticed the solitary whale singing. Their spirits lifted as they watched the girl's song spread and other voices join in. My children intuitively understood the illustrator's decision to highlight the hearts and songs to symbolize a shift in our beliefs about whales. In reflecting on this book, my thirteen-year-old said, "It's about kindness and if you treat others well you might not get something out of it, but it might affect them greatly." My son was able to understand the potential one person can possess as well as the joy one experiences by helping others.

Thankfully, commercial whaling is no longer a worldwide issue, although a few countries still engage in it. Through the work of many people over the past centuries, the human perspective of whales has transformed from a frightening resource to majestic creatures. Once, whales were hunted and killed for the products they provided to humans. Their baleen was used as a precursor for many plastics. Today, people hunt them with binoculars to marvel at their beauty, stature and playfulness.

In sharing this book with my children, they each found a theme that spoke to them and that could be further explored in a classroom. My oldest son identified with the baby whale's plight and the ways in which human advancement took precedence over the whale's welfare. My ten and eight-year-olds, who have always been sensitive to the needs and treatment of animals, identified with the role of the protector. They have wanted to build an animal sanctuary since they were little. My daughter said, "Our animal sanctuary will be by the ocean so

it can include whales." After reading the book, she and I sat together searching the internet for information on whale sanctuaries. She was relieved to find many of them include other marine animals.

Heartbeat does not provide readers with a clear message about protecting the whale, but it does inspire us to preserve our current relationship with these magnificent creatures. Viewing this story through Evan Turk's evocative, emotional, and expressive heartbeat (literally and figuratively), it is difficult not to feel a deep connection to these amazing animals.

Works Cited

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

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