



The Head of the Saint

Written by Socorro Acioli
Translated by Daniel Hahn
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You can't leave here without lighting the candle your mother asked you for.
(p. 149)

One of USBBY's Outstanding International Books for 2017, this novel delves into the beauty of magical realism and how the mystical is an ever-present part of the everyday. Samuel is 14 years old and an orphan. Before his mother dies, she asks Samuel to light candles at the feet of three saints—statues that can be found near the home of his absent father. Samuel makes the trek—16 days' walk—and finds his father's family home. Receiving no welcome at his grandparent's home, Samuel is directed by his grandmother to a dry space in the forest near the village. Starving, homeless, and weak from his pilgrimage, Samuel finds the dry space—the concrete head of St. Anthony, a part of a giant statute created to honor the saint. The head was never placed on the concrete statue because it was too heavy for a crane to lift. Soon Samuel is befriended by teenage Francisco, who uses the head for illicit reading. Francisco brings Samuel food and Samuel shares that he hears the prayers of villagers within the head. Samuel and Francisco decide to “answer” the prayers of villagers, who call the answers miracles. What transpires from these miracles fits entirely within the genre of magical realism as family secrets are revealed and lives are restored.

This wondrous book from Brazil brings together tragedy, destruction, and tradition into a work of beauty. *The Head of the Saint* would be a wonderful way to introduce adolescents to the genre of magical realism, and so could be paired with other pieces of magical realism such as *The Book Jumper* by Mechthild Gläser (2017) or *The Walls Around Us* by Nova Ren Suma (2016). It would also make a nice addition to other books on traditions, miracles, and secrets such as *All We Have Left* by Wendy Mills (2016) or *The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, the Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog* by Adam Gidwitz (2016).

Socorro Acioli was born in Brazil and works as a journalist. She received a master's degree in Brazilian literature, and was encouraged to attend a workshop conducted by Gabriel García Márquez (one of the premier authors of magical realism in the world) based on her idea for *The Head of the Saint*. She has won the Jabuti Prize for children's literature in Brazil and is currently earning a Ph.D. in Literary Studies at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, where she also teaches literary theory and works as a translator. Daniel Hahn works as a translator of literary fiction. He translates books from Portuguese, Spanish, and French. He is part of the UK

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