



The Tunnel

Written by Sarah Howden

Illustrated by Erika Rodriguez Medina

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When turning the initial pages of *The Tunnel*, the reader immediately realizes something bad has happened with illustrations of a sad child and mother. The illustrations are shades of gray and black, detailing a quiet home that wasn't always that way. One cannot help but feel the loneliness of the main character. The pale-skinned, dark-haired child describes struggles with connecting to others; for example, when their mother gives a tight hug, the child does not always hug back. Or when an aunt visits and asks "Are you okay?" the reader can plainly see the discomfort on the child's face.

After this interaction with an aunt, the child retreats to their room and begins digging a fantastical tunnel. Down, down, down into the ground, past all sorts of creatures who don't seem to notice the intruder. Rodriguez Medina illustrates the deep dark corridors of this child's grief through the tunnel. Whatever has happened to the father, it was life altering. The winding tunnels are filled with insects and moles scurrying about busy with their routines, and this is of some comfort to the child, who may be searching for time to be anonymous while mourning. The only flash of color is the child's red shirt and a dotted trail that marks the path. Everything else is gray, cream, or black.

The child comes out of the tunnel in the backyard, glimpsing home with mother and aunt inside. The child has a moment of quiet, considering leaving and never coming back. As a reader, this moment is heavy with feelings of deep sorrow permeating the page. The child says, "No one knows I'm out here. I could just disappear" (p. 12), but sees their mother in the window, and something nudges them to stay. Perhaps it is the understanding that while this pain is immense, there is someone there for them. Perhaps the child feels ready to find comfort with their mother after some time away. The child returns, climbing back into bed. Their mother comes to check on them, and when she hugs the child, they hug back as tightly as they can. The child's mother notices sticks and twigs in her child's hair and asks what happened, and the child explains. The mother is understanding, saying, "You came back." (p. 30). We are left with the understanding that everyone needs a secret place to get away when grieving.

One book that can be paired with *The Tunnel* is Oliver Jeffers' (2010) book, *The Heart and the Bottle*, about a child grappling with feelings of loss. In this book, the main character takes out and hides her heart so the pain is easier to bear, yet eventually realizes she needs her heart. Both texts are brilliant allegorical examples of how people cope with the pain of grief.

Sarah Howden is the author of *The Tunnel*. She lives in Toronto, Canada and has written several other books for young readers, including the picturebook *Cone Cat* (2020) and the

short chapter books *Misty Copeland: Ballet Star* (2020), as well as *Roberta Bondar: Space Explorer* (2020), part of the series *Fearless Girls: I Can Read! Level 1*, published by HarperCollins.

Erika Rodriguez Medina is the illustrator. She is a Mexican art teacher and illustrator living in Vancouver, British Columbia. Her illustrations have been in many children's books and has garnered attention from major publishing houses like Simon and Schuster and Macmillan. Together, Howden and Rodriguez Medina have crafted a beautifully quiet and poignant tale about dealing with trauma.

Sarah Howden said in an interview with OwlKids, "I hope readers will know that it's okay not to always feel happy, and it's okay to not be able to put into words what you're feeling... and to want to be alone, and be with your feelings in your own time. But that sitting in that grief with someone who loves you can ultimately help you through" (OwlKids). She wrote the book from a place of remembering her own struggles with grief as a child. Erika Rodriguez Medina stated that she hopes readers remember that, "they can carve a place for themselves to process big emotions and then come back once they feel ready" (OwlKids).

The Tunnel would make an excellent addition to an elementary counselor's bookshelf. As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other tumultuous events, many children have suffered with little recognition or support for getting through tough times. *The Tunnel* demonstrates that when children are upset, it is okay to feel disconnected and to seek solitude; and when children are ready, someone will be there for them. *The Tunnel* is a comforting book, reminding us that grieving is natural and everyone grieves in their own way. It is particularly lovely that the main character is illustrated as gender neutral so anyone can look at the illustrations and see themselves.

Books about moving through loss and trauma with compassion and honesty are greatly needed in every classroom. *The Tunnel* is one that could easily be loved by many children and families looking for solace in literature.

References

OwlKids (Ed.). (2022, May 3). Creator corner: Author Sarah Howden and illustrator Erika Rodriguez Medina. Owlkids Books.

<https://owlkidsbooks.com/creator-corner-author-sarah-howden-and-illustrator-erika-rodriguez-medina/>

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