

A Masterpiece About a Masterpiece, for All Ages

An enchanting work by Italy's foremost living children's author is finally available in English.

By Joseph Luzzi

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GLOWRUSHES, by Roberto Piumini. Translated by Leah Janeczko.

Once in a great while a book comes along that's equally enthralling for children and the people they call grown-ups — a book playful and accessible enough to hold a young person's attention yet sufficiently resonant and complex to keep a seasoned reader turning its pages, sometimes even while fighting back tears. We label these works children's classics, but really they're a literary wake-up call, as books like Carlo Collodi's "The Adventures of Pinocchio" and E.B. White's "Charlotte's Web" reveal their brilliance at every stage of one's reading journey.

Roberto Piumini, a legendary Italian author of children's stories, wrote such a book in 1987. Considered his masterpiece, **GLOWRUSHES (NYRB Kids, 128 pp., paperback, \$13.99, ages 9 to 12)** is now out in a graceful English translation by Leah Janeczko that captures the sprezzatura and spare elegance of the original.

"Glowrushes" is the story of a painter named Sakumat who journeys from the ancient Turkish city of Malatya to a distant land ruled by Lord Ganuan, who has commissioned him to paint the windowless rooms of his son, Madurer, a sickly child whose strange incurable illness forbids him from any contact with the natural world ("every trace of sunshine and dust is harmful to him"). Ostensibly, Sakumat's assignment is to decorate the interior realm that Madurer can never leave. In truth, his colors and lines must provide the windows to an outside world that Madurer's medical destiny cruelly denies him.

Sakumat is a cross between a Dantesque pilgrim in the middle of his life's journey (he's described as "neither young nor even old") and a Buddha-like sage indifferent to earthly temptations (he demurs when Ganuan promises him riches, remarking that "a painter has but one mouth to enjoy the flavors of food and but one belly to comfort"). Madurer, too, is a mix, part precocious youth who excels at chess and part frisky pup who squeals with joy in games of hide-and-seek and takes pleasure in belting Sakumat with silk cushions. They immediately hit it off, and soon enough Sakumat forsakes his magnificent room so that he can sleep on a carpet beside Madurer's bed, the better to hear the boy recount his dreams while they're fresh in his mind.

The theme of artistic creation runs from the beginning of the book to its end. Sakumat neither chases the muses nor doggedly waits, paintbrush in hand, for them to appear. Instead, he revels in what we might call the negative space of the artist's craft: He listens to Madurer's words, observes his everyday world and above all gauges his wishes before commencing to sketch. Nearly half the book passes before his first brushstroke. By this point, Sakumat's intention is clear. The murals of Madurer's rooms will be not only *for* him, but also, in essence, *by* him. The painter's brush will move in tandem with the boy's imagination and, better still, his soul.

Sakumat and Madurer's collaboration offers more than a parable about making art. It also reveals how we come to inhabit the forms we create. The pair's discussions about a pirate ship featured in one of the murals lead to endless modifications, from the number of men on board to the effect of the wind on the ship's movements. Sakumat even adjusts its size, painting it bigger to simulate its approach and bring its details into focus for Madurer's eyes. Art slowly transforms into narrative as the two comment on the imagery, culminating in Sakumat painting a cabin boy named Madurer sitting astride the bowsprit. Nature may have denied Madurer the chance to sail actual seas, but through his and Sakumat's artistic partnership other types of flight become possible.

Fables are at their best when they move in and out of reality seamlessly, when their fantastic inventions illuminate the real-life problems we face and their make-believe characters' masks fall off to reveal the human elements underneath. Italian culture has been blessed with such creations, from the tales of Italo Calvino and the cinema of Federico Fellini to of course Collodi's marionette turned boy, Pinocchio. In Piumini's "Glowrushes," the imagination can only take one so far. No dazzling emanation from Sakumat's magical brush can rescue Madurer from his tragic fate. However gut-wrenching, this plot turn is part of what makes the book such an aesthetic success. By its end, we have come to love this boy and to savor his friendship with Sakumat — a connection that blurs the line between fairy tale and lived experience.

The glowrushes of the title are conceived by Madurer, who describes them as rare "firefly-plants" that light up the nocturnal fields. One night soon after, Sakumat awakens him and tells him to look at the painted walls: "Bewildered, the boy sat up in bed. All around him in the darkness, hundreds of slender wisps glowed with a golden light. Bending this way and that, they shone throughout the dark meadow and seemed to sway in the wind."

In the name of his love for a fragile child, Sakumat achieves his mightiest artistic feat, giving his young friend the one gift forever denied to him: nature itself.

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