

## Oliver Jeffers and Sam Winston's *A Child of Books* (2016)

### Review

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“I am a child of books. I come from a world of stories [...] I have sailed across a sea of words to ask if you will come away with me.”

Over the past decade, Oliver Jeffers has become one of the foremost writers and artists involved in modern picturebooks. The subject of his latest book speaks, as it were, for itself: the power and possibility of books, language and stories, embodied in a nameless girl. She calls away an equally anonymous boy from his monochrome world to sail the seas with her, to discover treasure and “sleep in clouds of song”.

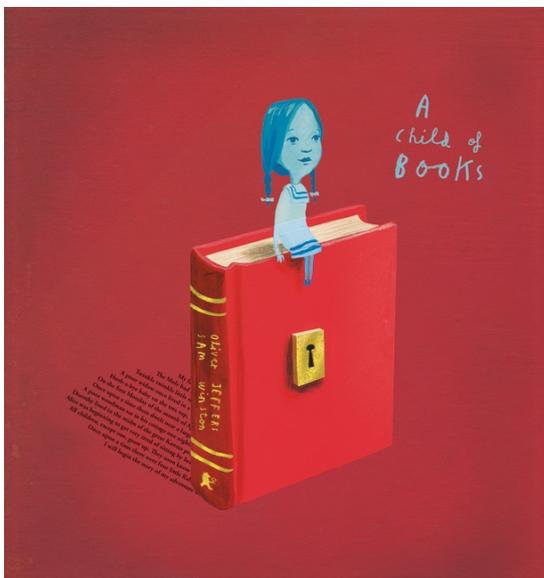
Much of the book has a quiet mood, but its minimalism is deceptive: a closer look reveals the children's landscape to be composed of typescript: familiar lines from *Peter Pan and Wendy* form lofty mountain peaks, sea voyage narratives swirl together in ocean waves, while *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* juxtapose to produce a surprisingly inoffensive composite monster. The book results from Jeffers's collaboration with artist Sam Winston, whose previous work includes a deconstructed dictionary. Their approach here will surely fascinate children still getting acquainted with the written word: it suggests playful and irreverent approaches to texts and text itself. It makes the work a collaboration between themselves, and Lewis Carroll and Mary Shelley too, among others.

The book's epigraphs, from Miriam Rukeyser and Primo Levi respectively, invite us to think of language in philosophical terms, yet the 'child of books' seems to promise only the pleasures of fiction, and the fiction of prose at that (perhaps suggesting an old-fashioned disdain for other forms of narrative).

Through its use of such canonical Victorian texts, the book, perhaps inadvertently, adopts a prescriptive, didactic tone, at odds with its invitations to escape and discover.

The reader is constantly reminded of Jeffers's own visual dynamism particularly in images like the one house glowing with colour and otherness on a grey city street. But there is confusion, too, in the depiction of the 'child of books'. This patently adult voice is figured in Jeffers's illustrations as a young girl, ambiguously rendered in otherworldly blue. As guide to the book's implicit addressee, a reluctant boy (will "you [...] come away with *me*" – my emphasis), the book's only female character is presented in an enabling, even parental role for the boy. While I'm sure the authors would deny it, the book's universalised text about a "home of invention [...] where anyone at all can come" has an exclusionary quality alongside these illustrations.

It is a shame that such strange choices belie a book with such laudable intentions, innovatory playfulness, and beautiful production. It would be exciting to see such energy applied to a less universalising approach, perhaps a work of bibliomemoir. As it is, *A Child of Books* feels un-childlike and un-bookish, a case of pointing at the moon but looking at the finger.



## WORK CITED

Jeffers, Oliver, and Sam Winston. *A Child of Books*. Walker Books, 2016.