Tibet Through the Red Box (Caldecott Honor Book) by Peter Sis

Work Of Art

As a child in 1950s Czechoslovakia, Caldecott Honor-winning artist Peter Sís would listen to mysterious tales of Tibet, the roof of the world. The narrator, oddly enough, was his father—a documentary filmmaker who had been separated from his crew, caught in a blizzard, and (according to him, anyway) nursed back to health by gentle Yetis. Young Sís learned of a beautiful land of miracles and monks beset by a hostile China; of the 14th Dalai Lama, a Boy-God-King; and of a magic palace with a thousand rooms—a room for every emotion and hearts desire. Hearing these accounts—some extravagant but all moving—helped the boy recover from an accident. The stories also allowed Sís’s father to relate an odyssey other adults didn’t seem to want to know about in cold war Czechoslovakia. He told me, over and over again, his magical stories of Tibet, for that is where he had been. And I believed everything he said, Sís recalls. Still, after some time he too seemed to become immune, and the stories faded to a hazy dream. With Tibet: Through the Red Box Sís finally pays tribute to this fantastical experience, illustrating key pages from his father’s diary with complex, color-rich images of mazes, mountains, and mandalas. He also produces pictures of his family at home—simple, monochromatic images that are just as haunting as their Himalayan counterparts. In one, a wistful mother and two children gather around a Christmas tree, the absent father appearing as a featureless silhouette. Tibet is a treasure for the eyes and heart. Some will ask: Is it for children or adults? Others will wonder: Is it a work of art or a storybook? One of the many things that this book makes us realize is that such classifications are entirely (and happily) unnecessary. (Click to see a sample spread. Illustrations copyright ©1998 by Peter Sís. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.) --Kerry Fried

My Personal Review:
I once had the great good fortune of seeing Peter Sís speak before a large audience of New York City Public Librarians. Charming, blessed with an uncommon eloquence, and funny as well Sís spoke of his work over the last few decades. From this speech I learned that Sís designed the poster for the movie of Amadeus, that he was originally from Prague, and that one of his best works was something called, Tibet: Through the Red Box. I
was intrigued, but months passed and I filed away Tibet into my To-Be-Read pile of picture books. It was only with my steady reading of every single Caldecott Honor (of which Tibet won one in 1999) that I at last came to the book itself. I expected a title that was some sort of early-reader-this-is-what-Tibet-is kind of a thing. I had apparently forgotten that this was the man who brought us that remarkable Charles Darwin biography, Tree of Life. Tibet: Through the Red Box is no mere picture book. Its a personal history and unreliable memory combined into the ultimate tribute to the authors father.

In 1994 Peter Sis received a note from his father that said merely, The Red Box is now yours. Rushing home, Sis found the box in question and opened it to reveal a diary kept by his father of his time in Tibet in the mid-1950s. Sis the elder was a documentary filmmaker, and as such he was sent by the army film unit to China to make and teach filmmaking. The job was supposed to be about the Chinese highway currently being built in the Himalayas that would open Tibet up to the rest of the world. While there, Sis was separated from his project and explored the world of Tibet deeper than (he suspected) any Czech citizen before him. In this book, Peter Sis takes sections from this diary and illustrates them with his signature dotty style. Interspersed with his fathers written recollections, Peter includes his own childhood memories of the fantastical elements of the trip his father would tell him. There were Yetis that cared for him while sick, and lakes filled with fish that had human faces. The final meeting with the Boy-God-King, the Dali Lama himself, is expressed with riveting finesse.

Back we go to that old question that comes up whenever a picture book doesnt fall strictly into a set category: Is it a book for adults or for kids? Which is to say, will kids want to read it, or get anything out of it if they do? And the answer, of course, isnt all that simple. As many of the reviews for this book already state, there are multiple uses for this title. Readers vary from reluctant teens to awe-struck ten-year-olds. What Ive always loved about Siss work is his ability to write something meaningful for people of all ages. So on the one hand you have a fun story about a father seeing fantastical things (its no coincidence that Sis chooses to include a quote about Marco Polo at the end) and on the other hand youve a complex story of a son trying to figure out who his father is and at what price a world can be utterly destroyed.

When I saw Sis speak, he made a self-deprecating statement that Ive been turning over in my mind ever since. Sis said that when he was first trying to get jobs, he thought the best way to distinguish himself from everyone else was to draw using millions of tiny dots. In retrospect, he realized this wasnt such a bright idea. For while the dot style was unique and much sought after, it meant he had to spend countless hours dotting and redotting his books. Tibet is dot-o-licious, this is true. And while not quite as insanely detailed as the aforementioned, Tree of Life, it still an eye-popping wonder. My favorite section however, chronicled the fathers trip through the magic palace of Potala, where every room is different.
There's a red room that is sunrise and sunset, heart of time and a green room that is square and circular, ear of earth. At this point the book begins to resemble nothing so much as the book, Maze by Christopher Manson. If you're a fan of crazy rooms leading nowhere at all, check out that book as well.

Don't pick up Tibet: Through the Red Box if you're looking for some light picture book fare. That is the number one wrong way to approach this kind of material. Instead, fix yourself a hot cup of tea, snuggle on a comfy couch with a child or adult that you love, and page through the remarkable and touching story of one man's ode to his father. We should all be so lucky to have done so much, lived so well, and be remembered in such an evocative way.

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