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# Voyages in the Underworld of Orpheus Black

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

You may remember David Almond's recent brilliant re-working of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth in *A Song for Ella Grey*. Now the Sedgwick brothers, aided by Alexis Deacon, take that same descent into the underworld; this time to explore the cruelty and misery of modern warfare. This tale of two brothers, one a conscientious objector and firefighter, the other a soldier, takes place in London in the winter of 1944-5, as the V2 rockets wreak terror and devastation. This is no ordinary tale of the Home Front in the Second World War. Both men are unknowingly caught in the same bomb blast and, separated, linger at the hallucinatory edges of death. Harry escapes from hospital to wander the nightmare streets hunting for Ellis. With him is another hospital escapee, Agatha, a Jewish refugee hoping to be reunited with her parents. They descend further underground, just as Londoners did to flee the bombing, but what they find in the depths is not a temporary sanctuary, but a dark night of the soul. This is an ambitious book: in its conception and authorship, and in its scope. About two brothers, one a poet, the other an illustrator, it is written by Marcus and Julian in alternating prose and poetry. And Alexis Deacon takes on the persona of Harry the illustrator, contributing drawings from Harry's own notebook intended for his anti-war opus *Warriors of the Machine*. The three creators take us back convincingly to a particular time and place, they find the portents of a worse time to come, and they take us beyond then and now to seek a more profound understanding of ourselves. They seek to say something about what is best and worst in us. I am reminded of two of my favourite films: Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and Del Toro's Pan's *Labyrinth* (2006), both of which, in their different ways, mix fantasy and reality to similar telling effect.

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