

The Boy Who Lost His Spark

Maggie O'Farrell

Daniela Jaglenka Terrazzini, Illustrator

Walker Books US (Apr 1, 2025)

Softcover \$9.99 (112pp)

978-1-5362-4042-9

Moving to a cottage in the countryside unsettles a boy in Maggie O'Farrell's fantasy story *The Boy Who Lost His Spark*.

Jem misses the city. He struggles with school: A learning disability is hinted at, and he's prone to fidgeting. His sister, though, is enchanted by their village's legend about noukas, furry, impish creatures that live in the volcano. Nouka visitations are spurred by people's unhappiness; their harmless pranks, from exchanging sugar for salt to stirring up a cat, shake people out of their brooding. But Jem doesn't think noukas are real. When one of the last noukas senses Jem's tense mood, it prompts a mysterious encounter that releases Jem from his fears of not belonging.

Read-aloud cadences and poetic imagery, as with likening the experience of climbing into a tree and sitting among its leaves to being on a "great, green ship in the wind," pair with outstanding, cozy illustrations. These feature nostalgic items including a bentwood chair, a Linzer cookie, and a pitcher of custard alongside a light gray swirling motif that suggest lyrics to a nouka song. The absence of modern touches enhances the fairy-tale ambiance, in which the noukas have existed for so long that they know more village history than anyone.

Overt messages about belief (people don't need to see the air they breathe to believe in its existence, the book notes) complement the book's march toward Jem's inevitable change of heart, which is enchanting because of the expressive artwork, in which his feelings of astonishment register well.

In the gentle fantasy story *The Boy Who Lost His Spark*, a boy made separate by his own self-awareness comes to joy with a little help from an otherworldly friend.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2025)

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