EL REINO SECRETO (DE LOS HERMANOS MOZART)
Author:
Sofía Rhei
Reader:
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Sofía Rhei's magical children's novel opens on 27th September 1764, in a house in London, where Nannerl and Wolfi (Maria Anna and Wolfgang) Mozart are staying while touring the country, giving concerts in the mansions of the nobility.

Life for the Mozart siblings is not always easy; their father forces them practice constantly and Wolfi, then almost nine, finds the constraints of his life difficult to bear. Nannerl, his thirteen-year-old sister, whose diary entries we are reading, cannot always understand why her father does not seem to appreciate her talents and tends to blame her when Wolfi disobeys orders and sneaks out of the house to listen to the birds.

While one would imagine from the age of the main characters that this novel is aimed at children between ten and thirteen, Sofía Rhei has created a story capable of capturing the attention of readers of all ages. The prose style is clear, concise, with a vocabulary accessible to younger readers, while never talking down to them. Although set in the 18th century, the text makes no attempt either to use archaisms, or overtly modernise the language.

Written as a series of first-person diary entries, the novel not only explores the childhoods of Mozart and his elder sister, but also addresses the deeper issues which children of any era must address. Among the most important of these is the state of the young Mozart's mental health: is he, as seems to be rumoured, mad? Or could his difficulty in relating to the emotions of others be a sign of autism?

A number of other books have been produced on the theme of The Magic Flute (mostly in picture-book format), but where this novel differs is in the way it imaginatively transfers elements of the opera into the children's lives, almost suggesting the basis for the writing of the opera itself. González's brilliant illustrations add a further level of depth to the narrative: reminiscent of Quentin Blake, they are sometimes whimsical, but also capable of expressing the darker elements of the plot. In addition, they include snatches of the melodies referred to in the text, which any child studying music could relate to.

I strongly feel that this book, with sensitive translation, would find a home in the English-language market, and would moreover suggest that, as they contain no textual elements, González's illustrations could successfully used in this context. I feel it is a book which, in addition to its pedagogic value, will cross age boundaries and delight readers of any generation, both in the reading or the telling.

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