



Boy Underwater

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

~~New Talent~~

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Cymbeline Igloo (his father was an actor, hence the name) can't swim. His mother appears to have an aversion to the sea, swimming pools, any kind of expanse of water and has never allowed him to have swimming lessons. Not that that stops Cym from boasting to the class super-horror Billy Lee that he's ready to take him on in a race when the class starts its weekly sessions at Lewisham Pool. Every reader of course will see that disaster is bound to follow and it does: Cym has to be pulled from the bottom of the pool ? losing his trunks in the process ? by the girl of his dreams, Veronique Chang. The humiliation is made worse when Mum arrives to collect him and ?goes nuclear? in front of the whole class; later, on another fateful school trip this time to the Tate Modern, Cym's best friend Lance describes Munch's *The Scream* as ?Cym's mum?. By then though, Mum is in a psychiatric hospital and Cym is stuck with his cousins until she's well enough to come home. When she disappears from the hospital, Cym realises that only by untangling the family secrets will he be able to save her.

It's a book built on those often unacknowledged gaps between child and adult, and on our habit of keeping things from children to avoid hurting them when in fact lies and secrecy only make things worse. Cym's mother is not the only one to have secrets in this story, and in fact all the adult characters do. The truth uncovered by Cym, with the help of his friends including Veronique, is a story of family tragedy and terrible loss, but acknowledging what has happened brings a kind of healing, and the possibility of a happier future.

Cymbeline is a convincing central character with a narrative voice as distinctive as his name, even if at times he seems considerably more mature than the year 4 boy he's supposed to be. In his debut novel for children, Adam Baron has successfully maintained a delicate balance between comedy and tragedy and there are scenes that will have children laughing aloud, as well as others that will leave many readers in tears.

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