

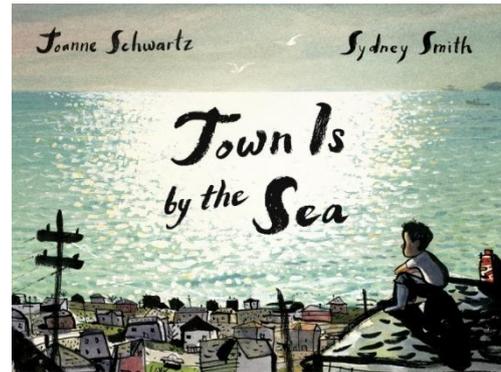
## 2018 Kate Greenaway Medal shortlist VISUAL LITERACY NOTES

Title: **Town is by the Sea**

Illustrator: **Sydney Smith**

Author: **Joanne Schwartz**

Publisher: **Walker Books**



### First look

- Share the book together, reading the words and looking at all the images.
- With any picturebook, the full meaning can only be understood by combining information given by both the words and the images. In *Town is by the Sea* the written text is in the voice of a small boy. The pictures, therefore, tell the reader things that the boy does not know.
- Set in the 1950s, this seemingly simple tale has a deep, dark subtext. Talk in pairs, or as a group, about how to unravel the full meaning of this text?

### Look again

#### **Look first at the front cover.**

What element dominates the picture on the front cover?

Does the place look like a seaside town where people might go on holiday?

The sea is pale blue. What colour is the sky? How can you tell that the sun is out?

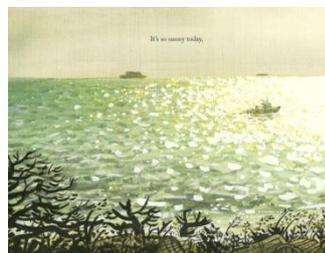
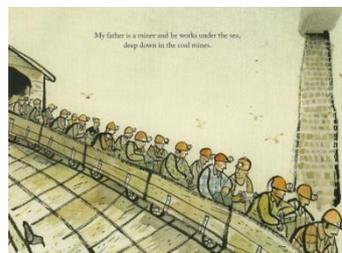
There is a splash of bright red behind the boy. What is it? Why is it there?

Two seagulls are flying above the sea. Why?

#### **Open the cover and look at the end papers.**

They are totally black. Throughout the book thick black lines, shapes and shadows are regular features. Does all this darkness mean anything? Could it be related to what the men of this town do all their working lives?

### Continue to look closely through the book



As you turn each page there will be more questions to ask. Some will be simple e.g. 'At what time of day does the story start?' And some will be more thoughtful e.g. 'What is the first thing the boy thinks about when he looks out of his window?' Follow the boy through his day – getting up, meeting a friend and playing, having lunch etc. All the time he is thinking of his father. Why?



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Readers are constantly reminded where 'father' is working. By looking at the pictures set underground, discuss what a miner's job must have been like about 60 years ago. Contrast the images of men underground with those of the children on swings; dark, dangerous and forbidding compared to sunlit, fun and carefree. Yet the boy's thoughts are '... I can see far out to sea. Far out to sea, the waves have white tips. And deep down under that sea, my father is digging for coal.'

If you were the boy, what might you think could happen to a man who works under the sea, beneath the coal seam, in the dark, claustrophobic atmosphere of a mine?

### Artwork

Sydney Smith is the illustrator of *Town is by the Sea*. His choices of media, and the lines, shapes and colours of each image, are what give life to the written text. The words move between the boy's descriptions of events and his subliminal anxieties about his father. Smith's use of contrast in each image – stillness & movement, light & darkness, roughly & delicately drawn lines – reflects the conflicting feelings combine to create the character of a whole mining community.

Choose two contrasting images that illustrate the freedom of the children's summer school break compared to the everyday work of a coal miner. Discuss your choices as a group.



Look at the picture of the family – mum, dad, boy and baby – near the end of the book. There is a dark smudge under the table. Is it just a shadow or could it have a metaphorical meaning? Whatever it is, it seems to hold the family together. Look through the book at Smith's use of black lines and shapes.

### Illuminating the written text through creative or critical thinking

When studying a book, it is always beneficial, to use tasks which require imaginative or creative response. The use of creative activities (e.g. art, drama, researching, invention, music etc.) encourages students to engage fully with the text. The following suggestions may help get the group thinking about different aspects of this the book.

#### Speech/thought bubbles

If possible get some speech bubble post-it notes to place on the pictures.

What might:

- the boy's dad (in the blue check shirt) be chatting about as the miners travel in trucks to the coal seam down under the sea?
- the mum be thinking as she waves goodbye to the dad?
- the family be saying to each other as they eat their evening meal?
- the boy be thinking every time he mentions his father?

### Artwork



Does this picture of the men arriving at the mine remind you of an English artist? Look at the work of L.S. Lowry. Use all the pictures showing the father underground to help you draw a comic strip to show what happens to him while he is below the sea? Has he been safe all day?



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### *Research*

Mining has always been an important, but very dangerous, occupation. Use the library and internet to find out what mining was like in the UK in the 1950s. What happened to the mining communities of the UK in the 1980s?

Today, all over the world, coal seams are being abandoned in favour of cleaner, more economic sources of energy. When that happens, communities are damaged. Generations of men have worked in mines – just as in the book, a grandfather will be followed by a father who will be followed by a son. *Town is by the Sea* is set in Cape Breton, Canada. Today the men are still mining but life and livelihood are still at risk as they were in the 1950s. See this news story: [\*\*Cape Breton's Donkin coal mine lays off 49 people.\*\*](#)



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