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Bronze And Sunflower



Synopsis

A beautifully written, timeless tale by Cao Wenxuan, best-selling Chinese author and 2016 recipient of the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award. Sunflower is an only child, and when her father is sent to the rural Cadre School, she has to go with him. Her father is an established artist from the city and finds his new life of physical labor and endless meetings exhausting. Sunflower is lonely and longs to play with the local children in the village across the river. When her father tragically drowns, Sunflower is taken in by the poorest family in the village, a family with a son named Bronze. Until Sunflower joins his family, Bronze was an only child, too, and hasn't spoken a word since he was traumatized by a terrible fire. Bronze and Sunflower become inseparable, understanding each other as only the closest friends can. Translated from Mandarin, the story meanders gracefully through the challenges that face the family, creating a timeless story of the trials of poverty and the power of love and loyalty to overcome hardship.

Book Information

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Age Range: 9 - 12 years

Grade Level: 4 - 7

Customer Reviews

To read [Bronze and Sunflower's] adventures is to be embedded in the Chinese countryside • for good and bad. The daily circumstances of their lives may be different from those of American children, but the emotions and relationships are universal. •The New York

Times Book Review In Wang's translation of his leisurely, languid prose, Hans Christian Andersen winner Cao captures both the infinite joys and harsh realities of rural farming life...While seemingly idealized, the story and its protagonists reflect the Confucian values of filial piety and society above self. — the very foundation of Chinese culture. Readers of all ages should be prepared to laugh, cry, and sigh with satisfaction. — Kirkus Reviews (starred review) Hans Christian Andersen Award — winner Wenxuan — a moving story of a friendship between two lonely Chinese children, orphaned Sunflower and mute Bronze, bears all the elements of a classic: an inviting and solidly constructed setting, a close-knit family, and a kindhearted community (there's even a pet buffalo). — Publishers Weekly (starred review) Virtuous and kind, Bronze and Sunflower's family reflects important cultural values including filial piety, respect for elders, the value of hard work and education, and the importance of saving face. This not-to-be-missed story reminds us to be thankful for family and love, no matter our station in life. Helpful back matter provides additional insight into this specific time in China's history. — Booklist (starred review) Capturing a distinct time and place as well as moments of bittersweet universality, this vivid and accessible novel for 9- to 12-year-olds would make for a superb family read-aloud. — The Wall Street Journal The landscape, captured in lyrical, evocative prose, takes the leading role in this episodic novel set during China's Cultural Revolution...This beautifully written depiction of a time and place not often seen in children's literature makes for a strong purchase. — School Library Journal Told in spare yet glimmering prose, this story is a testament to all that love and loyalty are able to overcome... In a time when our divisions seem to be drawn more forcefully than ever, Bronze and Sunflower's unlikely bond serves as a beacon of hope. — BookPage The details about rural Chinese life are a revelation...Cao shows English-speaking readers a foreign world where time is measured in the seasonal comings and goings of the swallows, but also a familiar one where the fabric of family is woven from shared hopes and unexpected acts of kindness. — Shelf Awareness Pro The author does not shy away from heartbreaking events such as famine, storm devastation, and the loss of loved ones, resulting in a moving and at times shockingly honest account...Translator Wang manages successfully the difficult tasks of maintaining the stylistic integrity of the original text and achieving a high level of readability in her translation. — The Horn Book These beautiful moments of love abounding in the midst of hardship and poverty are timeless and will appeal to all readers. — School Library Connection Two lonely children, scarred by tragedy, form an inseparable bond in this lovely novel from a beloved Chinese author set in the Chinese countryside during the Cultural

Revolution. **•Buffalo News** The constant hardships of rural poverty are balanced by selflessness, love and the beauty of nature. The story's ending is both heartbreaking and transcendent, reminiscent of the best fairy tales. **•Plain Dealer** Ideal for bookclubs, this is one of the finest translations I've ever encountered and undeniably the best Chinese middle grade novel I've ever read. **•A Fuse #8 Production (blog)**

Cao Wenxuan is one of China's most esteemed children's book writers and has won several of China's important awards for children's literature. *Bronze and Sunflower* is his first full-length book to be translated into and published in English. A professor of Chinese literature at Peking University, Cao Wenxuan has seen many of his books become bestsellers in China, and his work has been translated into French, Russian, Japanese, and Korean. Helen Wang studied Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and is now a curator at the British Museum. She has been a translator for more than twenty years. She lives in London.

It's odd. Parents these days. I meet so many of them that believe that to live in a globalized society it is imperative for their children to learn another language. That's not the odd part. That's a great thing. Suddenly you have all these immersion classes (usually just for kids that can afford them, but still) and six-year-olds speaking Mandarin and Spanish and more. No, for me the strange thing is that it stops right there. The kids are taught other languages and maybe some rudimentary facts about the country that originated those languages aaaaaand . . . that's all folks. Imagine how much more sense it would make if those kids then read books originally published in those other countries. Better yet, what if kids all over the United States were required to read at least one translated and/or imported title from another country every few months or so? I mean, talk about putting yourself in another child's shoes. But for a lot of Americans, translations aren't any kind of a necessity in their children's lives. As the author Marc Aronson once told me, even a teacher or a children's librarian getting a degree could go through a whole graduate program without even once being required to read a translated book (aside from *"The Little Prince"* which doesn't count and *"The Diary of Anne Frank"*). Now take the case of the man that is arguably the most famous Chinese author for children in the world. Cao Wenxuan is so well known that in 2016 he won the Hans Christian Andersen Award, given by an international committee in

celebration of a life. It's work. So how many of his books do we have here in America? Zip. Zero. Zilch. Oh wait. That's not exactly true anymore. "Bronze and Sunflower" has just been released in the States. It's bold and unfamiliar. Touching and terrifying. Historical but somehow also timeless. It's one of the best dang novels I've read for kids in a long time. Do you truly want your kids to be citizens of the world? Then hand that world to them. Give them this book.

The rural village of Damaidi is not particularly large, but it is a healthy community. Some residents are well off and some are not, but all of them are curious about a far stranger village that exists across the river. That place is called the Cadre School, and it is home to a little girl named Sunflower. Having traveled there with her father, an artist that creates bronze sunflowers, she is left all alone in the world when he dies unexpectedly. Fortunately she has already bonded with Bronze, boy unable to speak, who from a very poor village family. Though his parents and grandmother know they can't afford the girl, they take her in anyway and she becomes an integral part of the household. By their side she survives floods, famine, and fire. How? She always has Bronze and Bronze always has Sunflower. Siblings forever.

Years ago, when I was in grad school, I read a book called "Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter" by Adeline Yen Mah. Not long thereafter I read the Newbery winning book "Kira-Kira" by Cynthia Kadohata. Now please bear in mind that as a child I studiously avoided any and all books that I deemed too "sad". This may explain why it took until adulthood for me to read "Bridge to Terabithia" (though you have to admit that I called that one). Now imagine how it felt to me to read Yen Mah and Kadohata's books in quick succession. Both books pull that old trick where a character thinks something is going to be wonderful and then it turns out to be terrible. I call this the fuzzy chick rule. If a character is given a fuzzy chick in a book, you better be very careful because odds are that little chickie isn't going to be long for this world. Now I worried, and with good reason, that "Bronze and Sunflower" was going to be that kind of book. And to be fair, Wenxuan really does pour it on when he kills off Sunflower's dad. If you didn't know, going into the book, that the guy was going to die at some point, you probably had a clue when he started thinking things like, "Now he was desperate to see her. The feeling was intense, as though he might never see her again." So I was pretty sure that every time someone in the book thought about the future in a happy way, their plans were going to be ruined. And this does happen from time to time, yes indeed, but

it's not so consistent that the reading becomes unpleasant.

Wenxuan's true talent is showing that in the midst of extreme ugliness there is something beautiful in sight. Which is not to say that the book isn't sad. Oh, it's sad all right. And quite frankly I, a 38-year-old woman, am having a devil of a time figuring out whether or not the ending is a happy one or a sad one. I'm inclining towards sad but it's an ending not dissimilar to the one you'll find at the end of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. The reader reads into it what they may. A little spoiler alert on the rest of this paragraph if you don't want to know more about the end. Ready? Okay, so at the end of the book the city Sunflower originally came from desperately wants her back. They believe that leaving her in Damaidi was a terrible error and they want to have her come to town, live with nice "aunties", and finish her education there. I assumed the village would stand up to defend her, and wasn't surprised when it happened. But then the city people, rather than force the issue, try diplomacy instead. They have long, reasoned conversations with the adults. As an adult reading this, I myself was swayed by their arguments. I suspect that kids would not be, particularly when you see Bronze's reaction. So is the ending happy or sad? Maybe it's just impossible to say. And who's the bad guy in this book? Every good book has a bad guy, right? And actually, in this book there's a character so casually cruel that his first appearance on the page may actually convince more kids to read this book than put it down. The boy's name is Gayu, and he's best described as a spoiled little Malfoy of a kid. He appears when Sunflower discovers that she's adrift on a boat in the river, unable to get to shore. Teasing her with the possibility of being rescued, and then denying her, he reduces her to tears and pretty much makes the readership want to throttle him right there and then. I expected him to pop up in a villainous way throughout the book after that, but Gayu surprised me. This wasn't his last repugnant act, but Wenxuan allows his antagonist the chance to learn and grow until, by the story's end, he's actually helping our heroes. No, if there's a true cruel, unrelenting, hostile villain in this piece it is nature itself. Tornadoes and locusts and fire and even hungry ducks conspire to continually thwart our heroes. The overall impression I had by the story's end was that there was a great, terrible beauty to nature, as with the sunflower fields, that can turn on a dime. Never trust it. Never turn your back on it. Appreciate it, but steel yourself for its sudden change of heart. May I now say a word or two in praise of translator Helen Wang? As with any translation you're uncertain

how much credit to place on the translator vs. the author. The two are comingled, in a way, so that it's impossible to separate them. But if I had to guess, I'd say that Wang took great pains to replicate the poetry of Wenxuan's language. His settings are evocative, whether you're lost in the reeds or drifting on a boat or riding a water buffalo. But what I really love are his characters. There's such a kindness to the author's characterizations. People are flawed, absolutely, but there's usually something you can admire about them. I also loved how ingenuity is the true method of beating back villainous nature. The book often goes into great detail on such topics as weaving shoes out of reeds or cutting a particular kind of grass for a house's roof. Process, when rendered carefully, can be as fascinating as plot. Together, Wang and Wenxuan achieve that balance. Reading this book initially, I was surprised to find it was a work of historical fiction. The late Cultural Revolution, to be precise. When I worked at New York Public Library I had a Chinese co-worker who truly disliked the Cultural Revolution. Not because of what it did to her family personally, but because every single time a new children's book came out on the topic she'd be asked to vet it. She pointed out, rightly, that when it comes to middle grade children's fiction, the books about China that aren't outright myths and folktales are always about The Cultural Revolution. I don't work with her directly anymore, but I hope that when they hand her "Bronze and Sunflower" (as they are certain to do) she enjoys it as much as she did "Little White Duck" by Na Liu. That was a book where she was overjoyed to discover moments from her childhood never before seen in an American book for kids. Of course "Little White Duck", like "Bronze and Sunflower" is about a city girl who goes to the country. The difference lies in the fact that Na Liu is terrified by what she finds there, while Sunflower is completely and utterly enthralled and never wants to leave. You can see where Sunflower is coming from too. I would give 3.5 of my eyeteeth to know how kids react to this book here in the States. I think the storyline lures them in immediately. Honestly, I felt like there were a lot of similarities here to the "Birchbark House" or "Little House" books in terms of a family working with and against nature in order to survive. Kids who like those books could find a lot to love in this one. They'll bond with the characters and then reach that ending that lends itself to a lot of discussion. Ideal for bookclubs, this is one of the finest translations I've ever encountered and undeniably the best Chinese middle grade novel I've ever read. In a world where

every other children's book begins to resemble its fellows, "Bronze and Sunflower" stands out from the crowd. The world loves it, after all. Who are we to disagree? For ages 9-12.

Bronze and Sunflower By: Cao Wenxuan Translated from Mandarin by: Helen Wang Illustrated by:

Meilo Sol received an ARC in exchange for my honest review. This book meanders along at a leisurely pace - evoking an entire culture and world through its well thought out prose. It is one of those books that requires you to slow down and just take a moment. Here's an example: "If people on passing boats scanned the long riverbank, they would spot her tiny figure. They would feel the vastness of the sky and the vastness of the earth, ..." So yeah - you get the point. Do not skim over this book quickly. Consume its contents slowly to fully enjoy each word picture. It's an excellent translation by Ms. Wang.

Setting: This book is set in a very specific time in China during the cultural revolution. It's fascinating in that it shows in intimate details how people lived during this period of time.

Characters: Sunflower, an orphan, comes to live with Bronze's family. Bronze was involved in a frightening and painful fire and hasn't spoken since then. The two become very close. Their relationship defines the word, "family".

Discussion: Sunflower's dad is an established artist from the city who specializes in (you guessed it) sunflowers. During the cultural revolution, intellectuals, etc. were sent to May Seventh Cadre Schools. I didn't know what this was but looked it up. These camps were "re-education" centers designed to reprogram intellectuals with the beliefs of the new government. They sounded very much like labor camps in that the inmates worked very hard physically all day and in the evenings attended classes. This made for a difficult and lonely life for Sunflower. She saw villagers across the river who seemed so full of life. She could not cross the river on her own to join them and could only watch. Ironically, her father dies by drowning and this tragedy is her bridge across the river. She is taken in by the poorest family who have a son, Bronze. The book has a sort of fairy tale feel to it - albeit a Chinese fairy tale - in that each member behaves ideally. The mom (who is widowed) is self sacrificing "for the good of the family. Bronze seems happy to add another member to the family even though it means less resources for him. This means skimpier food rations in a family where all the rations were scarce to begin with. He even comes up with a way to raise money to send Sunflower to school while not even considering himself. Sunflower is the ultimate, sweet natured girl in the face of all adversity and challenge. She is adorable in an idealized child sort of way so it's impossible to dislike her. However, people like this only exist in fairytales. This book has the lesson of family over self which I believe is a very important Chinese value.

Illustrations: There are some gorgeous little ink drawings at the beginning of

each chapter. They are not a prominent part of the book but I just had to mention them because they are inviting and add to the charm of the landscapes described in this book. In other words, spend a few seconds enjoying each. Overall: I loved the lush world created by this author and would welcome more books that let us understand other cultures and their values. Sent from my iPhone

This is a sweet and lyrical tale, part folktale, part myth, part historical fiction, part children's adventure. With simple prose, the author takes the reader through the history of Sunflower, as she follows her father to the Cadre School. During the Cultural Revolution in China, her father, an artist, is sent to the country to be "educated" in the ways of the simply farmer. His named his sweet and shy daughter for his favorite flower. When he dies, she is sent to live with a nearby country family, who's only child, a boy named Bronze, is mute. There, through the seasons and cycles of the village, Sunflower and Bronze, brother and sister, face with courage, wisdom, and love the many trials that come upon them. I would highly recommend this for children. It is an honest book. It doesn't pretend that life on a farm wasn't hard, that starvation and death aren't real. But it does show that family and love are what helps us survive. In addition, the exposure, in a colorful, honest way, to the life in China during this time is perfect for young minds. Enough explanation is given to open up understanding but not overwhelm with useless facts. The story deftly weaves bits of Chinese culture into the narrative and it is excellently done, giving a clear picture of the wonderful and fascinating world. Worth reading.

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