Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Sirens by Peter Suart ", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/567. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Peter Suart

Sirens

Hong Kong (2004)

TAGS: Sirens





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Sirens
Country of the First Edition	China
Country/countries of popularity	Hong Kong
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2004
First Edition Details	Peter Suart, *Sirens.* Hong Kong: MCCM Creations, 2004, 48 pp.
ISBN	9789628681686
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Crossover (The publisher recommends the Tik & Tok series 'for adults who love illustrated literature and children aged 8 and above.')
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Creators



Peter Suart , b. 1962
(Author)

Peter Suart is an artist, writer, musician, and theatrical performer. He was born in Jamaica, raised in Hong Kong and educated in England, where he is now based. He is the author and illustrator of the twelve *Tik and Tok Adventures* books, as well as *The Folio Book of Christmas Ghost Stories* (2005). More recently, he has illustrated editions of classic works for the Folio Society, including *Gulliver's Travels* (2012) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2012). His work is surreal, clever, and mysterious, and defies straightforward categorisation.His books are neither picture books nor graphic novels, nor are they simply for children or adults.

Sources:

mccmcreations.com (accessed: October 12, 2018).

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Additional information

Summary

Sirens is the fifth book in the Tik & Tok series of adventures featuring a boy called Tik, and his friend, a dog named Tok. It references the ancient Greek myth of the song of the Sirens alongside allusions to the folktale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and confronts the themes of surveillance, propaganda, advertising, and the contemporary problem of children's addiction to screens and sugar. It is a picture book, in that it features written text accompanied by illustrations, but its complexity makes it fairly inaccessible for the young readers traditionally associated with this genre.

The enigmatic story opens with the small white dog, Tok, dreaming of an 'unearthly, distant song', which calls 'with an irresistible beauty.' (1) When he wakes, he is compelled to seek its source. He traces the song to a great city, surrounded by looming green walls that are covered in numbers. He follows a stream of rats pouring through the huge doors into a lifeless city of rusty machines. Entranced by their mechanical rhythms, he does not notice the net falling over him until he is captured.

Tok's friend, the boy Tik, wakes to find him gone. Climbing into his 'cinnamon boat', he too follows the call of the song. As he sails on a stormy sea, he passes another vessel. The stranger's shouts are lost in the rain and wind, but he tosses Tik a small bag, containing two lumps of beeswax. 'What can these be for?' Tik wonders, as he pockets the bag (5).

Tok is brought before Sir William, a sinister figure arrayed in coat tails and top hat. After discovering that his prisoner is not a rat, Sir William photographs him with an old-fashioned camera. Meanwhile, Tik arrives at the city to witness thousands of children entering the great doors, but he injures his ankle before he can follow them inside. Scaling the city walls, he goes in search of his friend. He finds a huge hall in which countless rows of children sit glued to screens, being fed on pills and soft drink. When his attempts to wake them from their trancelike state alert the guards, Tik escapes into the drains. There, he meets a group of fugitive children. Unable to speak, they offer him mouldy old books, and Tik borrows names for each of them from these texts. He comforts himself by playing his flute, 'a tune that said he wasn't doing anything in particular and how good that was' (17).

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Leaving the mute children in the drain, Tik re-enters the city and discovers Tok's image plastered on billboards with strange slogans in many languages. The dog is made to perform on stage in front of an adoring audience.When he is also captured, Tik learns that the city is under the control of the Catcher. This melancholy man is carrying out his revenge after the Elders failed to pay him for ridding the city of rats. In retaliation, he has entranced the children. He tells Tik he plans to 'fill their heads with electric fluff and their stomachs with chemical nonsense. And the best of the joke is that they will love it all' (31).

But the children from the drains undertake a daring mission to rescue Tik and Tok, replacing them with ragged toys.Tok drops his collar into the power station, causing a huge explosion that destroys the city. The children, the rats, and Tik and Tok make their escape.The friends return to their idyllic island home.

Analysis

The classical allusions appear in the book's title and opening pages. Tok is drawn to the sinister city by an enchanting song, and Tik encounters another sailor who tosses him a bag containing two lumps of beeswax, just like Odysseus' crew used to avoid hearing the Sirens' song. Tik puts the wax in his pocket rather than his ears, and the bag is not mentioned again. But it does seem to foreshadow the subsequent moment when the children at the screens fail to hear Tik's questions. The text emphasises their isolation and inability to communicate. 'The children were all is one great room together and yet every one of them was somewhere else and no words passed between them.' (25) The children in the drain are not able to speak, but they are able to hear, which enables them to come to Tik's aid after he is captured.

The alluring song of the sirens is linked with the music of the Pied Piper. There are suggestions that flute-playing Tik fulfills this role, though he seems to make music for his own comfort as much as for the children he meets, and the rats hate his song. When alarms ring out throughout the city, Suart plays upon the other meaning of the word siren. Suart seems aware of the way that the world of myth has infiltrated our vernacular. The barren wasteland of this city is itself a warning of the risks humankind is currently facing, with the siren representing the twin elements of allure and alarm.

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	The text celebrates the sanctity of childhood, as well as the power of the book. Suart conjures up disturbing images of children feeding books into the furnace to power the city's machines. The mouldy old books that have survived within this industrial world where 'not a tree, not a leaf, not a weed grew' (3) are powerful relics. Suart's own book is lavishly illustrated, drawing upon the steampunk aesthetics of industrial age Victorian England to create a surreal cityscape dominated by the colours red, green and grey. The pictures contain enigmatic details not referred to within the written text, with signs, hands and an orange appearing on several pages.*Sirens* prompts questions that are not fully resolved, but the text's conclusion finds Tik and Tok safely home again, enjoying the music of Tik's flute and the sounds of nature.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Sirens
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Authority Child, children Communication Intertextuality Utopia and dystopia
Further Reading	Suart's blog tikandtok.wordpress.com/ (Accessed 12 October 2018). *Mugwump — Peter Suart on books, illustration and memory* at the British Council website (Accessed 12 October 2018).

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