



Lampie and the Children of the Sea

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News & Choice:

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Lampie's real name is Emilia, but she lives in a lighthouse with her father, Augustus, who has lost part of one leg and is often drunk, so she climbs the stairs to light the lamp every night, except one night when she has forgotten to buy matches. That night, a ship crashes into the rocks, and there is trouble. Her father accepts the blame, but the punishment is harsh for both, as they are separated. Augustus is barricaded into the lighthouse so that he cannot buy any more bottles, and has supplies brought to him. Lampie is taken by the sanctimonious teacher, Miss Amelia, to live and work for seven years to pay for the loss of the ship, at its owner's home, the Black House, where there is said to be a monster. She has to work hard, scrubbing floors for Martha the housekeeper, but she befriends her son, the simple-minded Lenny, and discovers that the 'monster' is a boy, Edward, whose mother was a mermaid. (This is not a spoiler- there is a mer-boy on the cover.) Spurned by his father, the Admiral, who rarely visits the house, Edward has been trying to please him by practicing walking, but of course it's very difficult for him.

There are elements of *The Secret Garden*; here, as Lampie coaxes the frustrated boy out of his room and becomes his friend, and their mutual support means that he teaches her to read, and she enables him to find his talent for swimming. She takes him out of the house in a little cart, but almost loses him to a sideshow of 'freaks' which includes a mermaid. When the owner, the Admiral, comes home after a long time at sea, he finds a very different household, but is not pleased with the lack of walking progress and sacks them all. Fortunately, all is resolved to everyone's satisfaction, and some people, including some of the 'freaks', begin completely different lives. (Fans of the film *The Greatest Show* will appreciate the difference in their situation). Freedom in various ways for different people is very much a theme, but there is tension, excitement and humour in the telling, not to mention mermaids and friendly pirates. This is great story, which draws the reader in, and the characters are a delight, especially Lampie with all her credible strengths and weaknesses.

Annet Schaap is well-known in the Netherlands for her illustrations, and Pushkin, a publisher which regularly finds the best books in translation, has picked up this her debut novel, which has already won 4 prizes in the Netherlands and Flanders in the original language. This is not at all surprising, and one can only hope that there will be more to come.

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