

Book Review

Life After Whale: The Amazing Ecosystem of a Whale Fall. Lynn Brunelle and Jason Chin (Illus.). Neal Porter Books, New York, USA, 2024. ISBN 978-0-8234-5228-6, 48 pp.

In an approach as gentle as the strokes of the watercolor illustrations gracing each page, *Life After Whale: The Amazing Ecosystem of a Whale Fall* introduces what can only be described as the world's largest protagonist. However quickly she is introduced, she is gone; the blue whale reaches the final stage in her cycle of life. In an unexpected twist, this is merely the beginning of our story, as the author reveals to us an entirely different world in which this whale's passing gives life to a whole new ecosystem that will support millions of creatures for over a century. This is the story of what we call a whale fall, and how in death, whales provide the foundations upon which future generations of marine life are built.

Both curious children and adults alike will find this book difficult to put down. The illustrations provide a compelling visual context for the complex processes being expertly described through the words. In addition to stunning landscapes highlighting the deep-sea bustle, there are supplemental illustrations with accompanying explanations and additional facts that will certainly satisfy inquisitive minds. What could easily become a morbid experience is quite literally painted in a positive perspective that helps us to understand the circle of life without having to directly face our own mortality (let's save that for another book, shall we?). Lynn Brunelle has undertaken an arduous task in authoring this book, distilling a documentary level of textbook information into a before bed delight. Brunelle craftily shares a slice of life drastically different from our own in which entire food chains are created and then fall away only to give way to entirely new food chains after the flesh has long been stripped away. Over 150 years pass across 48 pages, following both brief individual experiences and yearslong phases.

This is not the average picturebook. It describes the life and death of the largest animal in the world, leading into the four varying phases of the whale fall timeline, providing copious amounts of information on the animals that make a life in the ever-dwindling remains. The phases of whale fall are not exactly picturesque, and at times even border on being frightening; however, we are pulled back up out of the deep, dark depths as we

reenter a world bathed in sunlight as the plankton feed on the nutrients left behind by the whale. We see the cycle coming to its conclusion and inevitable new beginnings as a new whale eats the krill that eat the plankton fed by the old whale's fall.

Each read-through guarantees that the reader closes the book having learned something new. At times nearly clinical, the matter-of-fact delivery may prove to challenge the patience of younger audiences; however, the brilliant paintings covering the pages will enthrall even the flightiest of attention spans. Jason Chin reminds us here why he is a Caldecott-winning illustrator with works of art that frame each phase in a perfect balance of scientific accuracy and watercolor blends. Vignettes thousands of fathoms below the surface of the water illustrate just how important the natural cycle of life is for millions of living creatures. These animals all coexist (or don't) among the massive skeletal remains of the great blue whale, all visibly living their individual lives.

In much the same way that it begins, the book ends with a feeding blue whale, highlighting the theme of nature's cyclical nature. Finely executed, this adventure into the ultimate story of life after death is a joy that should be experienced by all readers, however young or young at heart, or how fierce your passion for marine biology may be. The illustrations are sure to leave a lasting impression as the readers follow along anticipating what might just happen on the next page, losing themselves in the clash of hagfish and sleeper sharks among rattails and king crabs. With its impartial approach to the circle of life, death seems like just another phase as the whale feeds a community and then future generations through the legacy it leaves behind. *Life After Whale: The Amazing Ecosystem of a Whale Fall* absolutely belongs on everyone's bookshelf.

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