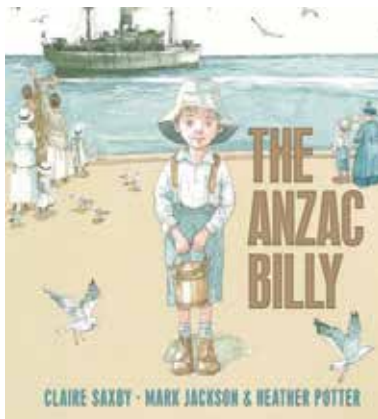


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The Anzac Billy

By Claire Saxby

2019

Black Dog Books

Sydney

Hardback, 32 pages

Illustrated

RRP \$24.99

Reviewed by Ingrid Perkins
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The Anzac Billy, written by Claire Saxby and illustrated by Mark Jackson and Heather Potter, is targeted at lower primary readers but contains much to engage older students. This picture book is narrated by a young boy helping to collect gifts to send to his father, a soldier serving in the Great War. 'I'm filling a billy full of Christmas for my dad,' he explains. What follows is a day-by-day account of the Christmas treats and tokens he collects, and the people who contribute them.

Simply but poignantly written, it soon becomes apparent to both the reader and child narrator that there is no certainty that the boy's specific billy will reach his father. Realising this, the boy requests that the potentially unknown recipient 'enjoy these treats, sir, but please send my letter on.'

The innocence of this request is punctuated by the illustration of anonymous soldiers, neatly ordered, row upon row, waiting to disembark. The imagery reinforces to the reader that, even if that letter does not reach its intended recipient, the little boy's generosity of spirit will not be lost in the machine of war. While the reader never learns the fate of the boy's billy, it's made clear that 'there's a Christmas billy for every war field soldier filled by families, filled by friends.'

The illustrators, Mark Jackson and Heather Potter, have captured with pencil and water colour the domestic images from a century ago. The sepia tones, muted blues, greys and greens are enigmatic of early photography. It offers a glimpse of domesticity during wartime, with the grandmother collecting the cutlery to lay the table, and mother holding the baby in front of the cooking range as she supervises her son's craft activities.

Each illustration contains much to be explored by the audience. The family visit the store, where there are items such as starch, dressmakers' patterns and propaganda posters displayed, as well as strange units of currency in use. On other pages there are thought-provoking reminders of yesteryear: fruit trees in the front yard, hens with chicks, a dog wandering in the streets unleashed, and the boy's mother and grandmother hanging washing on a single line propped with the limb of a tree. There is a sense of purpose, preparation and 'busyness' to the family's days, but also a tenseness in the waiting as the baby sits to be fed, as the soldiers wait to disembark, and as the family waits to greet their injured father and husband. Most poignant of all is the image of the little girl, a baby no more, who hides behind her mother's skirt, fearful of the stranger who is her uniformed father.

There is scope to use this book at both a primary and middle secondary school level. The Australian War Memorial website has useful background information on ANZAC Christmas hampers, and would be a suitable place to commence further research. Follow-up activities might include, for younger students, opportunities to create their own ANZAC billies or, for older students, deeper research and investigation into the suitability of the selected gifts for the war front, the impact of war on social structures, and the role of women in society at the time.

The Anzac Billy provides a snapshot of the home front contribution to war efforts and captures the feeling of 'waiting and worrying' beautifully.