

Be one. Be all. Be everything.

This is the mantra of the Striggs, a race of bird-like creatures who live deep under the ground in the future Earth of Chris Mousdale's epic new book ***A Place of Stone and Darkness***. It is a mantra that is repeated throughout the story as the Striggs set out to save their race from the feared Toppas.

The story is set far in the future, in a time where humans (or Toppas as they are known to the Striggs) have been almost wiped out. For centuries the Striggs have lived in the labyrinthine tunnels under the ground, carving out their own civilisation. Toppas are to be feared and a Strigg should never let themselves be seen by one, let alone touched. However, this is exactly what happens one day when, while wandering in the caves, Elle Meddo discovers a Toppa boy trapped in a well. Even though she knows it is wrong she rescues the boy and with the help of her brother, Sidfred, they hide him and nurse him back to health. It's not long before the Strigg leaders discover the boy, who Sidfred names Blue, and it is decided that Blue should be returned to the surface in order to protect the Striggs. The mission to return Blue to Uptop doesn't go according to plan and soon Elle, Sidfred and leader-in-waiting Kass are fighting for their lives in a frightening world.

A Place of Stone and Darkness is a dystopian story like no other, filled with heart-stopping action and characters that you don't want to say goodbye to. Chris Mousdale has created a world that drew me in and I got completely wrapped up in. Chris teases you with little details of the Strigg civilisation and their history which just makes you keep reading so you'll find out how all those pieces fit together. Throughout the first part of the book we get very little detail about the Toppas and the world Uptop so it is just as much a shock to us as it is to Elle, Sidfred and Kass when they leave the safety of their home. I found the first part of the book really interesting but the pace really picks up in the second part, especially when the adult Toppas show up. The shock discovery towards the end of the book took the story in a completely unexpected direction and it just made me love the story even more. The ending was absolutely perfect as it finishes the story but leaves you wondering what might happen next.

Not only is the story itself a fantastic read but the production of the book is also stunning. Chris Mousdale has also illustrated the book so his coloured plates add an extra layer to the story. The end papers are maps of Striggworld and there are other maps and diagrams throughout the story. At the start of the book there are also small illustrations of the different characters. I really love these little production touches as you can tell it is going to be a special book even before you start reading.

I think what really made the story stand out for me is the characters. Chris has created some very memorable characters, who you care more and more about as the story progresses. You want them all to survive their journey. The repetition of the Strigg mantra 'Be one. Be all. Be everything' reinforces the bond that all the Striggs have and the sense that, no matter what happens in the story, they are doing it for the good of everyone. They may have to make some sacrifices or put themselves on the line, but ultimately it will mean the safety of their civilisation.

A Place of Stone and Darkness is perfect for readers 10 years and up. Children who love fantasy and futuristic stories or a really good adventure story will devour this book. It would make a great read aloud for Years 6-9 as the story will keep kids hooked and there are lots of good places to stop, leaving some suspense for next time. This is one of my top reads of 2019 and I know it will be on my mind for a long time.