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Review 4 Graphic Novel

Smith, Niki. *The Golden Hour*. Hachette, 2021. Grades 4-8.

“When the world feels unstable, find an anchor” (29). Manuel Soto, a 5th grade student, uses photography as an anchor whenever he relives the past. After witnessing an act of gun violence at school, Manuel experiences flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. With the help of his friends, mother, therapist, and camera, Manuel learns how to find his focal point when reality gets blurry. Whether he’s taking a photo of a newborn calf, a pair of shoes, or “the fanciest, weirdest chickens you’ve ever seen” (58), Manuel learns how to go back to art class in the same classroom as the shooting.

When Manuel remembers this shooting, the color is sapped out of the page. The background goes black. The characters are sketched in grey and white, breaking out of their outlines as the memory breaks to the surface. The only color is gold. Yellow lines race across the page like bullets firing in a classroom, in a field, or wherever Manuel happens to remember what happened. Niki Smith’s art offers a striking visual representation of posttraumatic flashbacks. This art also tells the story of Manuel’s life outside his PTSD. When he’s taking photos in his rural town, he finds the same gold in a wheat field or a sunrise.

Just as gold can be terrifying or breathtaking, the book's title carries its own double meaning. Per the book jacket, golden hour is "a photography term for the period of daytime shortly after sunrise or before sunset." Golden hour is also the first hour after a traumatic injury. Niki Smith addresses this trauma in the nuanced way she tells the story. The shooting doesn't only affect Manuel. His mother struggles with anxiety after the shooting, yet strives to support Manuel. Manuel also finds support in his friends Caysha and Sebastian. The budding romance between Manuel and Sebastian is as sweet as it is sensible. Rather than serving as each other's anchor, they help each other find their own anchors, avoiding the pitfalls of rescue narratives in favor of mutual support. All in all, *The Golden Hour* is a wonderfully supportive story for anyone looking for an anchor.