

CHILDREN'S BOOKS: MEGHAN COX GURDON



Happy Earth Day

Four picture-book love letters to the big, beautiful planet that is our common home.



WE WALK on the ground, we drive along it and we take it for granted. How could we not? The ground is there

beneath us all the time, whether we like it or not. Yet what marvels lie within the earth, and what wondrous contours it possesses!

In the picture book **"Earth Verse"** (Candlewick, 48 pages, \$17.99), the restraint of Sally M. Walker's 17-syllable haiku poems combines with William Grill's lavish illustrations (see above) to stunning effect. Mr. Grill's distinctive soft, colored-pencil drawings in a palette of reds, blues and grays capture aspects of earth large and small, from minerals and sedimentary rock layers "stuck tight with mineral glue" to the vastness of mountains, glaciers and tsunamis. Beside the thrilling sight of a vol-

canic eruption, Ms. Walker writes: "Hotheaded mountain / loses its cool, spews ash cloud— / igneous tantrum." Pages of prose at the end of the book explain fascinating aspects of geology in more detail.

Working on the same terrain, as it were, Jody Jensen Shaffer has a bit of goofy, patriotic fun with American landforms in the picture book **"A Chip Off the Old Block"** (Nancy Paulsen, 32 pages, \$17.99). Lively illustrations by Daniel Miyares and aw-shucks puns make this an entertaining tour of spectacular geological sites for children ages 4-7. Our hero is Rocky, an expressive hunk of stone from a great family ("tons of his relatives were rock stars!") who longs to have a big purpose in the world. One morning Rocky heads out, pitching himself onto the back of a truck headed west to join his Arizona cousin, the sandstone formation known as the Wave.

No sooner does he settle in than he is plucked by an eagle and transported to the Devils Tower, a natural monolith in Wyoming. Washed away in a torrent, on Rocky goes, thwacking and plonking his way to Texas and then to South Dakota. Surely there's some nook or cranny where Rocky won't be "taken for granite"?

Vivid and varied nature photographs form the backdrop of April Pulley Sayre's "love letter to our planet" in **"Thank You, Earth"** (Greenwillow, 40 pages, \$17.99). "Thank you for water / and those that float, / for slippery seaweed / and stone," she writes. "Thank you for mountains and minerals / that strengthen bills / and bone." Each phrase is matched with a picture of a natural object, a lovely vista or a wild creature—from a delicate spider web to rusty sandstone formations in the Utah desert to harbor seals on a California beach. Notably, neither human beings nor the work of their hands appears in this picture-book appreciation for children ages 3-6.

People, and lots of them, do figure in Oliver Jeffers's sweetly quirky picture book **"Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth"** (Philomel, 48 pages, \$19.99), a project inspired by the birth of his first child. Having a newborn is a lovely and tremulous time for many of us, as we try to absorb the magnitude not only of welcoming a new life but also of being responsible for it. Mr. Jeffers captures the love and the poignancy in what is styled as an introduction to a newcomer: "Things can sometimes move slowly here on Earth," the author explains, as, in a flowery meadow, we see people dozing or amusing themselves quietly. "More often, though, they move quickly, so use your time well," he goes on, showing us a busy New York streetscape, and then turns elegiac: "It will be gone before you know it." Rich colors, witty pictures and a kind sensibility make this book, published late last year, a nice bedtime choice for readers ages 2-6.

