

Book Reviews

Reviews of the Look Further Books March 2020

SULWE

Lupita Nyong'o and Vashti Harrison

Sulwe means Star, but the main character of the same name does not feel like a star at all. She considers herself far too dark - she was born "the color of midnight" - and she wants lighter skin, just like her sister. Sulwe tries to lighten her skin with make-up, with an eraser and by only eating light-colored things. Nothing helps, not even mom, who tells you that being beautiful is inside you. Until a star takes Sulwe into the universe at night and tells the story of the sisters Night and Day.

Night is jealous of her sister, who is much more beautiful and whom everyone seems to love more than her. She decides to disappear and only reappears when it turns out that she is missed on earth, that day and night cannot exist without each other: 'Together they form the world we know, light and dark, strong and beautiful.' And after this nighttime excursion, Sulwe can also feel like a bit of a star: 'beautiful, inside and out.'

The theme of equality is discussed in a way that is understandable to young children. The Kenyan writer is a successful actress and is clearly personally connected to her subject. The fairy-tale nature of the story will easily appeal to young children, as will the large-scale, cinematic illustrations. These are also practical when reading aloud to a group.

THE INSIDE OF ME (De Binnenkant Van Mij)

Bell Hooks and Chris Raschka

The message of this minimalist picture book is simple and clear: You cannot tell what a person looks like on the inside from the outside. The text consists of short sentences, like a poem cut into pieces: "My skin cannot tell my story" or "My skin cannot come off."

The narrating first person invites the readers to come to their inner self. That inside consists of stories about the past, present and future, real, funny and fantasy stories, history, hopes and dreams: "Let me really be myself, then you will really be yourself for me."

The philosophical, idealistically tinted text fragments form a harmonious connection with the illustrations. In strong colors and large gestures, you see little people of all shapes and colors appear on the carefully designed pages, where "the real me of me" and "the real you of you" take shape. As meaningful decoration, a snake or an onion swings around here and there, both, after all, symbols of layering and "peeling off."

A white, acclaimed picture book maker in America came into contact with a black, feminist writer, who has been working on racial, class and gender inequality for years. And together they put the heart of a global problem in a beautiful and bright light.

SUPERHEROES DO NOT HUG (Superhelden Knuffelen Niet)

Michael Catchpool

SuperSam is busy rescuing people from dangerous situations. There are tigers that scare the tourists, disconnected trains that can cause disasters, collapsing bridges over wildly churning rivers deep in the jungle. Furthermore, as a Superhero, he must always be on the lookout for the Gray Shadow who seems to have a hand in all these incidents. He certainly has no time for hugs from his mother! Meanwhile, his mother insists that he must dress properly with a scarf, vest and belt before going on an adventure.

Emma Proctor's cheerful, colorful illustrations capture the attention of the reader who gradually discovers that these items of clothing do indeed play a role in the story. Every detail has meaning, and frequent rereading makes for new discoveries. This superhero has a rich imagination and his toys play an important role in his adventures. Take a good look! The story also has a surprising twist that can easily be overlooked.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BLUE (Het Mooiste Blauw)

Ibtihaj Muhammad with S. K. Ali

'The most beautiful blue' is a book in which life happens to children, but in which they also learn to deal with life. The storyline is simple.

Asiya chooses her first hijab, the headscarf that Muslim girls are allowed to wear as they approach puberty. That is a celebratory moment of choice, of learning who you are and who you can become: a coming of age.

The reader follows the events through the eyes of the younger Faizah, who admires her big sister, but also sees how she is teased. Faizah observes the transition to a different phase of life with pride and also with incomprehension and anger about the reactions of children who are not familiar with her family traditions. Between the mother and her daughters, caring for each other is essential and wise life lessons are implicitly passed on.

The illustrations - with lots of the intense blue of the headscarf - richly complement the text. Faizah leaps across the pages like an energetic young child, while the harassers are depicted as faceless, menacing silhouettes. And the wisdom is captured in enormous waves of water, brilliantly blue as the new headscarf: "Asiya's hijab is like the ocean waving to the sky."

The interplay of words and images creates a simple but powerful story about family, traditions, and faith as a basis for self-confidence and strengthening identity.

EYES THAT GLITTER IN THE CORNERS (Ogen Die Schitteren In De Hoekjes)

Johanna Ho

A girl notices that her Asian eyes are nothing like her friends' eyes. Her eyes are the same as her mother's. They sparkle in the corners and shine like gold. Her grandmother's eyes can see straight into her granddaughter's heart and they tell thousands of stories. In this lyrical ode to the eyes of the three generations of a family, the author, a specialist in education, stands up for her vision of self-acceptance. Chinese eyes reflect an ancient culture with beautiful art and strong faith traditions, but above all the importance of love and strong family ties. "In my eyes you see Mom, Mom and Grandma and Mei-Mei. In my eyes you see me and my eyes are beautiful."

The poetic words of Johanna Ho and the evocative illustrations of the Vietnamese illustrator Dung Ho invite you to discover your own definition of beauty.

SUGAR IN MILK (Suiker in Melk)

Thrity Umrigar and Khoa Le

"When I arrived in this new country, I felt very alone." That is the meaningful first sentence of *Sugar in Milk*, which immediately draws the reader into the story. It is a story of being displaced and unwelcome and of a possible answer to that rejection. A little girl comes to America from India without her parents to live with her aunt and uncle. She cannot settle in and is lonely. Until Aunt tells an old story about a group of Persians who no longer feel welcome in their own country and sail in boats to India. There the king explains that his land is full and that he shies away from these strangers, whose language he does not understand.

To illustrate his words, he fills a cup so full of milk that not a drop can fit. In response, the leader of the Persian refugees takes out some sugar and dissolves it in the milk: their presence could make life sweeter, not more difficult, but more pleasant! Cleverness and humor color the outcome of history and with it the reality of the sad girl in her new country.

The wisdom and eloquence of the story undoubtedly arise from the autobiography of the author, a successful journalist and writer who emigrated to America at the age of twenty-one after a difficult childhood in India. At least as important as the concise and simple narrative style are the the Persian-inspired illustrations. Contrasting the empty white world with the cold American skyline into which the protagonist arrives, are the lush colors and rich decoration of historical Persian life. A nice detail is that you can see on the carefully framed pages where the story-within-the-story begins and ends.

At a time when large groups of the world's population are adrift and uprooted, this book can provide a starting point and basis for starting a conversation about this with children. A side note seems to be the exceptionally sunny ending in the American story reality, which may be wish-fulfilling, but does not always correspond to the current reality of people on the run.

Review of Thank you, Omu October 2023

THANK YOU, OMU! (Dankjewel, Omu!)

Oge Mora

In Nigeria, Omu used to mean queen. In this story she is more like a kitchen princess, a motherly, dark-skinned lady, with a big heart and a wonderfully smelling stew on her stove. That scent wafts throughout the city and attracts several hungry visitors to her cottage. And they all get a bowl full, until the pan is empty when Omu wants to sit down at the table. Fortunately, all hungry visitors come by again with edible gifts, which leads to a merry neighborhood party. The simple, heart- and stomach-warming story is reminiscent of a folk tale, with the repetition of new hungry visitors and the familiar build-up of tension, leading to a happily-ever-after ending.

In addition to the simplicity of the text, the full-page prints in collage technique are of great richness and playfulness. While cutting and pasting, Oge Mora manages to conjure up a sprightly image of a big-city society, with an eye for detail and with extra information for the reader. For example, you see Omu with a book in her hand when she is not cooking, and the mayor and the baker are visibly female, without a word being said.

Most picture books have separate creators for text and illustration. When words and images come from the same source, this creates - as here - great harmony and eloquence. Omu not only deserves a thank you for her delicious stew, but also for her beautiful story.

Recensie van Julian is een Zeemeermin december 2023

JULIAN IS A MERMAID (Julian Is En Zeemeermin)

Jessica Love

Julian is a boy with imagination and dreams. He would prefer to be a mermaid. He reads about it in his book and, in the swimming pool with Grandma and the ladies in their colorful swimsuits who look like a mermaid - a little too fat.

While Grandma is in the shower at home, Julian transforms himself into his dream image. The torn curtain becomes a spectacular tail, the fern and bunch of flowers turn into a waving headdress and Grandma's lipstick completes the metamorphosis. Grandma can't stay angry for long and a joint visit to a crazy carnival party on the beach ensures a harmonious ending.

Because of the closeness between grandmother and grandson, the unusual events breathe a warm, safe atmosphere, in which there is room for adventure and the realization of one's own desires. The story is primarily told through the moving, colorful pictures and requires careful viewing. An occasional short sentence provides support to follow the coherence of events. This leaves room for the reader's own input and addition.

Review of De Suitcase March 2024

THE SUITCASE (De Koffer)

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros

A picture book that can be read and viewed as a simple but illuminating play about the essence of the refugee problem. The friends fox, hare, and rooster are visited by a strange, and indefinable animal. He looks most like a failed cucumber and is lugging a large suitcase with him. The stranger claims that it contains not only a teacup, but his entire house, after which he falls asleep, exhausted.

The three open the suspicious suitcase and find, apart from the shards of a teacup, only a brownish photo of a rickety house. In a bad dream, the stranger relives his flight, only to be welcomed in a positive way when he wakes up, with a colorful, self-made house that looks like the old photograph.

Chris Naylor did not create a continuous narrative, but provides the elements in text and images to talk on a childlike level and to think about what it means to be a refugee. Using minimal resources, the cartoon-like figures represent different ways of looking at the unknown: curious, suspicious, sympathetic. Their text is printed in their corresponding color above their heads, like a cartoon balloon, without a balloon. The harmonious ending does correspond little with reality, but undoubtedly with the wishes of the young readers and those of the creator.