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Clarion Review

19,000 Years of World History

Prithviraj R
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A combination of anthropomorphism and typical animal behavior form the personalities of the memorable creatures in this collection of morality tales by Dr. Richard W. Leech. Button, a courageous young Scottish terrier, and her good friend Sally, an equally brave beagle, leave their safe, human-dominated homes to explore the woods and wetlands on the other side of the fence.

The two pups, like ecological watchdogs, shoulder the responsibility of protecting their woodland friends. In this series of dark, character-driven stories, natural enemies bond as friends. Age and canine–reptile differences are transcended in “Ssserek’s End” when the dogs join forces with Ssserek the rattlesnake to save a swamp from steel traps hidden throughout the wooded landscape. The author portrays the trapper as an unrepentant evil stereotype and sneaks in a message about environment protection.

In “The Story of Delph,” the dogs and snake form a friendship with an alligator. Along the way, they provide some tips on what friends should and shouldn’t do. “You know, Delph,” Button tells her new acquaintance, “friends don’t behave like you do. You don’t eat friends. They help one another, like we did.”

The brave little Scottie battles her nightmares and faces her nemesis in “Button and Great Horde of Rats.” When an enemy attacks her friends, Button gathers the creatures of the forest to stop rats from stealing the swamp-dwellers’ babies and eggs.

Death, torture, violence, good vs. evil, and survival of the fittest enter into these six environment-friendly tales. Especially poignant is the death of a mother cat and her babies in “Mommy Kitty.” Although most of the creatures are native to the Oklahoma landscape, fantasy invades “How the Little Dragon Saves the Day” when Sara the dragon turns the tide in favor of Button and friends as they face their rodent enemies. The book’s final story, “The Raven of Elderwood,” seems unnecessary and ill advised for children’s literature. It includes a torture scene and stages yet another rat vs. forest creature battle.

Sadly the writing quality does not keep pace with the author’s imagination. Where one word would suffice, the author uses a dozen. Without tight, well-focused writing, the text meanders. Dialogue often omits important information and forces readers to search for the real meaning and decipher intent. Laden with a multi-syllabic adult vocabulary, this book quickly moves out of the prescribed parameters for children’s literature. For example, in the opening sentence, Leech writes, “The small, black figure negotiated the last of the back porch steps in a controlled fall, executing a forward roll in her haste to reach the fence.”

With tighter writing and a thorough edit for clarity and age-appropriate vocabulary, these compelling characters could attract an audience who enjoys such stories as Bambi and Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH.

DAWN GOLDSMITH (May 17, 2010)

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