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Picture Books

Absolutely Not
Matthew McElligott
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Two bugs, Frieda and Gloria, green and slightly grasshoppery in appearance, are about as opposite in personality as friends can be. Tall Gloria is brave and adventurous; short Frieda is afraid of everything, real and imagined. When Gloria suggests getting out of the house to take a walk on a lovely fall day, her little friend responds, “Absolutely not.”

Frieda is afraid of the big snake she has seen out the window. Gloria says that it’s nothing more than a river and urges Frieda to put on her glasses and go outside. Granny glasses perched on her ample nose, Frieda follows her bold buddy. Gloria, upper set of arms in the air, extols the beauty of the day. “Isn’t this a perfect morning?” she asks. “Absolutely not!” is Frieda’s refrain. She finds the morning frightening, and thinks they are being watched.

Readers can only speculate about what has the young bug worried. It could be anything from the clouds to the trees. No matter what Gloria sees as potentially fun or interesting, Frieda is fearful of it. Her imagination runs wild. She is afraid to jump in some leaves because frogs may be lurking there. An old log seems menacing. Gloria realizes that everything in the world, including a bicycle, looks dark and sinister to poor Frieda. “You find something bad in everything you see,” Gloria says.

As it gets late, Gloria suggests taking a shortcut through the woods. Frieda, predictably, is nervous about it, but has to admit that Gloria has been right about everything so far that day. She is even willing to acknowledge that she is a worrier. To prove her point, she explains that sometimes things remind her of other things, such as a certain pair of trees. This time, Frieda is right to be worried. The “trees” turn out to be the legs of a giant bird.

This is an absolutely winning combination of story and illustrations. McElligott has written and illustrated several previous children’s books, including *Uncle Frank’s Pit* and *The Truth About Cousin Ernie’s Head*. He illustrated *The Spooky Book*, and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Charming details enhance the pencil-and-watercolor drawings. Frieda clutches a small purse in her lower “hands,” as if it offers security. Gloria’s posture suggests total self-

confidence; Frieda’s shows her fears and worries.

The story’s resolution is a charming reminder that boldness must be tempered with caution at times, and that even worriers may be right in their assessments of danger. The book is an excellent vehicle for talking with children about their fears.

Linda Salisbury