ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

America's White Table
Margot Theis Raven
Mike Benny, illustrator
Sleeping Bear Press
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Katie is helping her mother set the table for the family's Veterans Day dinner. When her Uncle John sees an empty chair pushed up to an extra little table—specially set with a white tablecloth, a white candle, a black napkin, an overturned glass, a plate with a slice of lemon and a sprinkling of salt, and a red rose—tears fill his eyes.

Katie's family has arranged the table according to the symbolic ritual intended to remember and honor the U.S. military's personnel who are missing in action, or are prisoners of war. Katie's Mama explains how each item on the table has a symbolic meaning: "'We lay a black napkin for the sorrow of captivity, and turn over a glass for the meal that won't be eaten,' she said. 'We place a white candle for peace and finally, a red rose in a vase tied with a red ribbon for the hope that all our missing will return someday." The white cloth honors "a soldier's pure heart when he answers his country's call to duty," and the lemon and salt represent the bitter fate of soldiers who are left behind, and the salty tears of the families who await their return.

Mama tells Katie and her sisters about their Uncle John (deliverer of bear hugs and airplane twirls) and his terrifying experience as a POW in Vietnam, where he tried to save another man: "he learned … that a soldier risks his life for a fellow soldier, because the best of your country lives in every man and woman who would lay down their life for you, too."

Raven has written for radio, television, and magazines for three decades. Her previous children's books are *Angels in the Dust*, which won five national awards, and *Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot*, which won a 2003 Children's Choice award. Here, she describes the tradition of the Remembrance Table, which has existed in all military dining ceremonies since the Vietnam War. At such ceremonies, according to the Author's Note, "a series of toasts are made before being seated to eat, with the last toast, 'to remember until they come home.'"

The illustrator has provided art for national magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Time*, and has won two Gold Medals from the Society of Illustrators. In this, his first children's book,

his detailed watercolors are realistic and heartfelt; the words to *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* are subtly watermarked across the bottom of the pages, increasing the book's poignancy and accessibility.

No matter how a family feels about war or the military, this book will increase awareness of the sacrifice of soldiers, and the plight of the missing and the prisoners, and will offer an entry point for discussion, as well as a sensitive ritual of remembrance.

Karen McCarthy