



## An Unexpected Guest at my Birthday Party

**Alice Vanderpool**

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(6pp)

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*With themes on accepting strangers and responding to others with kindness, this is an optimistic, promising tale that bridges fantasy and the everyday.*

*An Unexpected Guest at My Birthday Party*, by Alice Vanderpool, introduces Max, a young boy in a rural setting, and a troll whose impulsive behavior sparks friendship. In its brevity, the writing reveals a talent for timing and for the gentle drama that suits young readers embarking on simpler chapter books.

The plot begins with a relatable, often eagerly anticipated event as its backdrop: the gathering of guests moments before cake is presented. Efficient sentences immediately capture the sense of joy in the scene. When a troll runs out of a lilac bush and devours Max's cake, the children respond—perhaps surprisingly—not with fear, but empathy.

A few edits would strengthen the work. The title's first person "my" does not match the third-person point-of-view in the book—a reference to Max in the title would be a catchier way to immediately identify the birthday boy. Familiar phrases, including "dazed and confused" and "wracked with giant sobs," could be sharpened. Reducing the number of exclamatory punctuation marks might also keep the text from appearing cluttered, while allowing illustrations or the story itself to convey emotions.

In a curious omission, the troll is not named, which may be a fitting detail to include if the book is intended as the first in a fantasy series. Max's mother is also given greater dialogue and is presented as the problem solver. Max does not speak; he remains in the backdrop as one of "the children." If he were drawn in an active role—perhaps by turning his mother's line "Don't worry, I feel sure we'll be seeing your new friend again" into his own—or if he were the first to approach the troll, he could emerge as a character to identify with and, presumably, as the one to carry forth in future adventures.

Especially well-drawn passages include the description of the troll's shoes. Whimsical color combinations and high-interest words such as "phosphorescent" stand out. The section that depicts wildlife—replete with reeds and dragonflies—as the troll departs is also rich in poetic detail. The strongest aspect, however, is the troll himself. An effusive personality who doesn't behave in the "gruff, bad-tempered" manner trolls are expected to, his search for human companionship is endearing.

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KAREN RIGBY (February 4, 2016)

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