ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

PICTURE BOOKS

Ante: Strangers
Deanne Gray
AuthorHouse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Ante, the main character in this tale populated by anthropomorphous insects, introduces herself to the reader as a creature "frightened by strangers" who "always wanted to stay with mommy." These are familiar feelings to many toddlers and preschoolers who are experiencing their first independent forays into the world. Gray, a parent of one, has designed this picture book to help alleviate those fears.

Simple writing and bold illustrations heighten the appeal of this book for very young audiences. Each two-page spread features a sentence of text on one side, and brightly colored, full-page illustrations of the characters in action on the other. Images of Ante and her family and friends show them engaged in activities with which young readers can identify: ants working in the anthill, Ante and mom traveling to daycare, and insect friends playing on a playground. Human touches, like Ante's mom carrying her in an apron, or Ante wiping away tears with a handkerchief, make the characters more endearing.

The sparse text is narrated from Ante's point of view. In language that is simple, direct, and accessible to young children, she shares her reluctance to leave her mother, her experience making a friend to play with at the babysitter's home, and her eventual realization that unfamiliar strangers are also potential friends. Unfortunately, due to the focus on her anxieties, Ante and the supporting characters end up being rather one-dimensional. A child who does not share Ante's fear of strangers would probably not find much of interest in this story. However, the book does have the potential to be used by families and caregivers as therapy for toddlers and young preschoolers with attachment issues.

By the conclusion of the story, the timid ant, with guidance from her mother, has learned that new situations lead to new playmates that make her happy. Through her experiences, Ante suggests that rather than feeling anxious about new people and situations, children could instead "wonder who [they] will meet next." That is worthwhile advice for children and adults alike.

Carolyn Bailey