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Basho and the Fox

Tim Myers
Oki S. Han, Illustrator
Marshall Cavendish (September 2000)
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Most people are introduced to haiku sometime in elementary school when they awkwardly attempt seventeen syllable nature poems. In Japan, however, haiku is revered as a true art form, a powerful, poetic example of the axiom “less is more.” One of the great haiku masters, Basho, who lived and wrote in seventeenth century Japan, is the inspiration for this charming fable by Myers.

Basho lives the simple life of a hermit poet, whose tranquility is disturbed when he meets a fox stealing fruit from a nearby cherry tree. The fox insists that the cherries belong to foxes more than humans, since it is the foxes that are the better poets. Their exchange results in a challenge, in which Basho is given three chances to write one good haiku. If he can do so, the fox agrees that all the cherries will be his to keep.

Basho works diligently, but his first two attempts are met with scorn. With wounded pride and determination, he tries again to write a perfect poem. When he meets the fox for the third time, he is at a loss for words. At the last minute, a haiku “comes into his head, as easily as flowing water.” It is this poem that convinces the fox of Basho’s greatness, and insures that the cherries will belong to the poet alone.

Myers’ clever commentary on the nature of ego and art is a perfect introduction to haiku for all ages. Han’s illustrations are lovely watercolors that fill each page with a delicate balance of nature and traditional Japanese border patterns. She offers unusual perspectives, giving the reader the stunning beauty of a cherry tree in full bloom and the whimsical group of foxes wearing kimonos. Basho and the Fox is a delight.

LEIGH FOREST (September / October 2000)

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