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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ PICTURE BOOKS

Blowing Bubbles

Kathleen Cherry
Aaspirations Publishing (Dec 1, 2012)
Softcover $15.99 (32pp)
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In *Blowing Bubbles*, Kathleen Cherry's text and Jill Quinn Babcock's illustrations combine to portray, honestly and accurately, the uncertainty a child feels when a family member becomes seriously ill.

Josh's thrill-seeking Grandpa George introduces him to roller coasters, speedboats, and go-carts during their weekly outings. Grandpa calls these adventures their "excursions" and punctuates each outing by blowing "a huge shiny pink balloon of gum" deemed "just right" by Josh each time. The routine of their relationship is disrupted when Grandpa George suffers an incapacitating stroke, and Josh must find a way to preserve their close bond.

This first published picture book by Cherry, an elementary-school counselor, seems designed for use as a bibliotherapeutic tool for children who are affected by the illness or aging of a family member. Josh's story provides a realistic depiction of the actions and emotions of a family grappling with a serious crisis. Josh knows something is wrong when his mom is sitting still at a table instead of doing her usual "bustling, cooking, and fussing." His own reactions, which range from the emotional (being disappointed that he won't be able to ride a go-cart) to the physical (kicking his grandfather's hospital bed), will resonate with children who experience this kind of loss. His throat hurts. The hospital smells. He doesn't want "to look at this Grandpa George who wasn't Grandpa George."

Babcock capably illustrates the story in realistic watercolor portraits that capture the nuances of emotion in the characters' faces, adding another level of accessibility to children who might find solace in Josh's story. The text and pictures portray the conflicting feelings surrounding the illness of a family member, and children going through similar situations will find much with which to relate.

The writing and illustrations will be appealing to elementary-school students in second grade or higher. The language is simple and direct, with snappy dialogue and imagery that will be clear to young readers. Depending on a reader's age and circumstances, this book may work best as a read-aloud experience with a trusted adult who can emphasize the resilience of the characters as they face a difficult time.

While the conclusion of the story is somewhat unrealistic, it is emotionally satisfying. Grandpa George remains hospitalized, but he and Josh find a way to find thrills as Josh recklessly steers his grandfather's wheelchair around the hospital. The ride is punctuated with "a huge shiny pink balloon of gum" rendered larger and rounder than any of the previous bubbles in the book.

Blowing Bubbles is an excellent tool for helping children who are facing the difficult situation of a having a loved one struck down by illness.

CAROLYN BAILEY (May 22, 2013)

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