Clarion Review

Family & Relationships

Bob The Ladybug: Bob's New Pants
Tommy Starling
Jacquie Gonzalez, illustrator
Bob The Ladybug
978-0-615-66848-2
Three Stars (out of Five)

“Aren’t there any boy ladybugs?” Author Tommy Starling uses this common confusion as the launching pad for *Bob The Ladybug: Bob’s New Pants*, a sweet, modest tale about diversity and inclusion.

Bob, a young ladybug who lives with his parents and younger sister, wonders why boy ladybugs wear dresses, unlike other boy bugs. He asks to wear pants, and his mother, Edna, cautiously agrees. Soon Bob meets all kinds of bugs, boys and girls, in all kinds of clothes—long pants, short pants, dresses—and learns that bugs can be happy wearing anything.

Tommy Starling is an equal-rights advocate with a husband and young daughter. He created *Bob The Ladybug* to help teach children about respect, empathy, and tolerance, and he has plans for more books featuring Bob and his friends.

Starling’s main strength lies in the way he handles what could be delicate issues with great dexterity and subtlety. The use of clothing is well chosen as an allegory for sexual preference, or for any other kind of diversity; it’s easy for kids to see that it is a bug’s (or a person’s) insides that matters. Adult readers may find added meaning in some of the book’s passages: when Bob hides in the closet, confused about whether it is okay to wear pants; or when Shea, a female ladybug who is Bob’s best friend, says to him, “I think you were born to wear pants!”

One of the most tender moments in the book comes when Edna reacts to Bob's surprising request for pants: "Bob's mom took a moment to think. She just wanted Bob to fit in and be like all ladybugs, but more importantly, Edna loved her son and wanted him to be happy." Edna soon tells him, "Bob, there are many kinds of bugs, and they dress in different ways … Being yourself and doing what makes you happy is the best way to live."

As nicely as Edna's reaction is handled, the scene misses a chance to include Bob's father, who only appears in the story as part of a family photo. Including Bob's father as part of the "acceptance" conversation—even if his feelings were more complicated than Edna's—might have provided a fuller story than ignoring the character completely.

The illustrations in *Bob The Ladybug: Bob's New Pants* are colorful, pleasing to the eye, and not overdone. The writing shows signs of inexperience at times—the most glaring example is a spelling error three pages into the story.

Overall, the book is a solid beginning for a character who could prove to be a memorable addition to children's literature as well as a valuable teaching tool. Recommended for parents or organizations looking for creative ways to address diversity.

Peter Dabbene