

Castles: Old Stone Poems

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Dan Burr, Illustrator

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Castles capture the human imagination. They serve as backdrops for historic events and springboards for otherworldly adventures, as well as monuments to some of the most famous names in history. In this offering, sixteen poems inspired by famous castles from around the world enliven the legends and events associated with each structure, setting a scene that will whet the reader's appetite for historical detail.

The featured castles run the spectrum of time and geography, from Bodiam Castle, which saw the Normans invade England in 1066, to Hearst Castle, built by the famous American businessman in 1919. In short poems (four to six stanzas), the authors capture the essence of each castle's history. Sometimes architecture is the focus, as in Japan's Himeji Castle, whose "windows pierce the sky like hushed haiku." Other poems feature people from history, rulers like Catherine the Great and King Henry VIII, or shadowy legends like the monster who lends his name to Romania's Bran Castle, also known as Dracula's Castle, "open these doors, drink in the view."

Both authors are accomplished poets, with numerous credits in magazines and children's publishing. Lewis is the better known of the two, having written dozens of children's poetry books, one of which is an American Library Association Notable Book.

While some of the rhymes here seem forced, the stanzas will satisfy the need of young readers for poetic structure. Burr's exquisite oil paintings add to the book's appeal. Each illustration is a two-page scene that sets the tone for the accompanying poem. Winged bats fly from the castle walls toward the reader on the "Bran Castle" page. The illustration for "Tower of London" shows Anne Boleyn walking through a dungeon, accompanied by her handmaidens, a jailer, and an executioner.

The large-scale, detailed illustrations will easily attract the eyes of the type of audience this book would suit best: kids in upper elementary through middle school with an interest in fantasy, history, or all things "castle." An appended section, "Medieval Minutes," includes "intriguing facts about the castles," and a timeline stretching from 1000 AD through the twenty-first century, adding to the browsing appeal for this age group.

CAROLYN BAILEY (January 5, 2007)

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