Clarion Review

General

Ella's Birthday Wish
Holly Floyd Hicks
iUniverse
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Two Stars (out of Five)

With a nod toward Cinderella, Holly Floyd Hicks pens the modern tale of Ella, a young girl caught between the dreams of childhood and the realities of life spinning out of control. The book opens with a familiar source of conflict: household chores. Ella's summer sucks; her mother works overtime at the hospital and her father is following the Tanner family's military tradition of serving in a war zone. She vents over some perceived mistreatment: "I don't know why Mom won't leave me alone, she thought. I haven't got the time to deal with her bossiness. How can I practice my dance moves or hang out with my friends when she is always insisting I help around the house?"

Mom, always level-headed and insistent about discussing every disagreement, talks with her daughter, spelling out the need for cooperation from every family member, including Ella's younger brother, Matt. Ella concedes that her mother is right, admitting, "I've been selfish. I just look at how much fun others are having, and I just think I want that, too."

The story proceeds through a pleasant visit from Grandma Tanner, Ella's tenth birthday celebration, and bad news from the war zone. Through it all the family sticks together, with Mom and Grandma freely dispensing advice and Ella and her brother quickly acquiescing to their wisdom. In an effort to keep the father figure in the scene, Ella ends each day by reading an email or letter from her father. He offers wise counsel and compares Ella's easy life with the hardships families encounter in Afghanistan.

The author sets up a series of difficulties for the family, yet defuses each situation before any momentum or suspense builds. The chapters read more like a series of parables or moral tales delivered in a voice that leans toward authorial intrusion and reportage. For example, Grandma defends Mom's long hours at the hospital with an overly simplified soliloquy about war causing many soldiers to need medical attention. "So many times people get hurt in war and

need to be in a hospital where doctors and nurses can help them…But thanks to your mom and others like her, they'll soon be feeling better."

This tale of a family's struggles during a father's deployment into a war zone, coupled with a coming-of-age story about a young girl, could be quite powerful. But characters are reined into tightly controlled socially correct behaviors, which undermine opportunities for conflict and character development. Disappointingly simplistic, Ella's Birthday Gift talks down to its target audience concerning current social and political issues. More attention to crafting scenes, dialogue, and characters is needed, with less emphasis on blatant parenting advice. Nevertheless, parents seeking a cautionary tale for a young child may find this book useful.

Dawn Goldsmith