ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

Finding Utopia
Paul H. Sutherland
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Timothy Gibbons, illustrator
Timothy M. Gibbons, illustrator
Utopia Press
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Proponents of enriched environments for children will be delighted to discover Mereki and Pangari, whose book-filled home contains several computers, *Rolling Stone*, and *Mad Magazine*, but no television. When the children pause from "inventing new soccer games like water soccer, bathtub soccer, living room soccer, golf club soccer, baseball bat soccer, and can't dribble soccer" to wonder whether there's any truth to their parents' claim that Australia is also the home of Utopia, they decide simply to fly there and find out.

Mariana, a family friend and Aborigine, accompanies the children on a wondrous transcontinental adventure. After an airbus flight that lasts for "24 hours and 48 minutes," they meet Mariana's Grandma Bargi and Grandpa Tipi. Putting on sunblock "slip-slap-slop," they embark on a two-day camel exploration of the outback and Aboriginal culture, replete with wondrous wildlife and sacred sites, and punctuated by camel burps.

Every page of this colorful volume is its own adventure, and children will come back to it again and again. The illustrator's designs are a dizzying kaleidoscope of colorful patterns, contrasting designs, and words. There's a poster of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue. A purple soccer ball and the family cat bound through Papa's laundry basket. The inside covers pay tribute to "Utopians" such as Mia Hamm, astronaut Jerry Linenger, Cheyenne chief Black Kettle, and Dr. Seuss's mythical Lorax, who also appears in a volume on Mariana's bookshelf. Even the page numbers promote intellectual curiosity; page 11, for example is represented by the math sentence, "16 — 15 + 2 + 8."

This is the second foray into children's fiction for this author/illustrator pair. Their first book, *Mani and Pitouee*, is a faux Native American folktale. While wearing his business hat, Sutherland also wrote *12 Steps to Carefree Retirement* and *The Physicians' Financial Sourcebook*.

If there is any criticism to be made of this book, it is that there is too much in it. The plot of Mereki and Pangari's Australian adventure can't hold its own against the light-hearted data-stream-of-consciousness that sprawls across its pages. Rather than reading the story, children and adults will become submerged in it, learning and celebrating right along with its characters. Utopia may or may not be in Australia, but it's an awful lot of fun getting there!

Elizabeth Breau