

For the Love of Big Balooka: A Tale of Faith, Family, Friendship and Forgiveness

Kathleen M. Barrett

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For the Love of Big Balooka is a middle grade novel in which forgiveness abounds as a supportive family helps an animal-loving girl rescue a dog.

In Kathleen M. Barrett's faith-based novel *For the Love of Big Balooka*, a girl perseveres to save an abused dog while learning about the power of friendship, forgiveness, and the love of family.

Set in South Florida, the novel focuses on the faith and mission of Meg, a book-loving fifth grader who dreams of becoming a veterinarian. With the help of two friends and her brother, she plans to rescue a Bernese Mountain Dog puppy who is treated cruelly by a new neighbor.

Having given the puppy the nickname Big Balooka, Meg and her crew collect the evidence needed to prosecute the dog's owner. They also arrange for the pup to be adopted by Meg and her family. Along the way, Meg teaches the abusive owner lessons in charity and forgiveness, inspires an entire town, and becomes a local media celebrity who advocates for animal wellness.

As the central character, Meg is consistent in her approach to life and its challenges. She does not evolve much during the book, but she does expand her understanding of the power of forgiveness, and the importance of building community as part of her higher purpose in the world.

With an upbeat sense of small-town culture, frequent references to prayer and scripture, and passing nods to important social issues, the book focuses on happy, well-cared-for kids living in a happy, safe, and secure world. Its story is optimistic and straightforward. There is never any doubt Meg will succeed in saving the puppy, that her parents will come around to her plan to adopt Big Balooka, or even that the abusive owner will have an epiphany of his own.

The result is a comfortable, comforting reading experience that delivers a clear, uncompromised moral. However, the book's dialogue is somewhat stilted, and elements of its story are oversimplified and dated. What it lacks in ambiguity and complexity, it makes up for with its accessibility, the clarity of its message, and its easy, happy ending, which is free of unpleasant surprises. Although it is impossible to disagree with Meg's mission, the lack of hurdles that she faces limits the audience to young readers and parents searching for bedtime reading material that pushes emotional buttons within comfortable boundaries.

For the Love of Big Balooka is a middle grade novel in which a supportive family helps an animal-loving girl rescue a dog, and in which forgiveness abounds.

KLAY DYER (April 19, 2021)

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