Clarion Review

Picture Books

Grandfather Big Elk: An Omaha Chief
Katharine Sires
Jackeyed Dog Press
978-0-9844094-1-9
Three Stars (out of Five)

Onphontonga, or Big Elk, was chief of the Omaha Tribe from 1800 to 1846. He was a warrior for his people and earned a reputation as a great negotiator by working with two presidents to develop treaties. Art teacher Katharine Sires weaves together stories of the Omaha people and the history of the famous chief in this children's book that brings the Omaha nation to life.

Grandfather Big Elk begins with an old Omaha man named Logan on a walk with a young boy named Cornelius. Cornelius asks Logan to tell him about Big Elk. Logan shares his stories, including the birth of Big Elk, his youth, his time as chief, and finally his death. As he listens, Cornelius pretends to be the chief, acting out important moments of Big Elk's life and asking questions about the customs of the Omaha people.

For the target audience, children aged eight to twelve, this story will encourage learning, as it lends context to what might otherwise seem like dry historical facts. The author provides information about the customs and beliefs of the Omaha nation in the details of Big Elk's naming ceremony, his wedding, and a vision quest he took as a young man. There is also information about the tribe's everyday life, including what people ate and which games they played. Sires describes the preparations that were necessary for a hunting trip, writing, "Onphontonga gathered food, clothing and regalia in his painted rawhide parfleche bag for the several-hundred-mile journey. On the trip, he spent many days perfecting his talents on horseback, learning to ride in all sorts of ways for the pursuit of buffalo."

The watercolor paintings that illustrate the book have a soft, hazy quality that gives the impression that the reader is looking through a window into a long ago world. The images that depict landscapes and activities are very appealing.

The book has several shortcomings, however, including the author's tendency to switch verb tenses. For example, in a description of Big Elk's spirit quest, she writes, "He praised the

four winds and waited, hungry and exhausted to see his spirit animal. The one that he will call upon if he is ever in great need as a warrior." Additionally, the book is presented from both the perspective of Cornelius, in which the reader learns the story of Big Elk, and the omniscient point-of-view in which the reader observes Cornelius listening and reacting to the story. Transitions between the two perspectives are marked by the use of different fonts but are sometimes difficult to recognize. This may make it challenging for young readers to follow the narrative.

Perhaps the book's most valuable information is contained in the appendices which include a pronunciation guide, a bibliography, and several activity ideas, including recipes, games, and crafts. These additions will help bring this story of Omaha history to life for young readers.

Catherine Thureson