Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

Halloween Mystery
Elizabeth Stiberth
978-1-4389-1112-0
Three Stars (out of Five)

There's nothing like picking out a pumpkin straight from the field when Halloween is coming. Farmer Brown makes a routine assessment of his crop and finds that something is terribly wrong. The kids from Lily Lake Elementary roll up and spill out of their bus excited about taking home their own pumpkins as they've done in past years. In a sinking moment excitement turns to mass dismay: "Everyone stopped and suddenly and gasped when they caught sight of the field. Instead of the beautiful large healthy plants that had always greeted them they were faced with a shriveled moldy rotted crop."

Farmer Brown isn't alone in his agricultural misery. All of the area's pumpkin producers report a similar blight. No one can explain the cause. The children brainstorm the possibilities: too much water or not enough; short roots scorching sun… No answer makes more sense than the others until someone suggests that the condition could be the work of the malicious Halloween Witch. After all the popular prejudice is that "Witches do bad things."

With great trepidation and a measure of courage the Lily Lake youngsters seek out Witch Hazel who may just be more lonely than spiteful. Perhaps this attempt to reach beyond unfounded fears could lead to a restoration of the pumpkin crop. A positive message implicit in the resolution is that older people often misunderstood by small children can be fun to visit and kinder than they may appear.

The images show moderate detail with woodsy and farm backgrounds. The task-oriented children dressed in cold-weather clothes appear happy concerned or frightened depending on the circumstance. One illustration with a touch of whimsy features Dr. Healer of the Department of Agriculture in full medical garb listening to a black-spotted pumpkin with a stethoscope looking quite doubtful while Farmer Brown stands alongside deeply worried. The opening page and two spreads in the middle of the book aren't accompanied by illustrations. The typeface is an informal one which resembles pencil lines.

This cute seasonal story evolved from its origins as a puppet show the author used to perform in schools. It is appropriate for early readers from Kindergarten through third grade or for grandparents who are expecting a visit.