

Clarion Review ★★★★★

PICTURE BOOKS

Houdini Carini

Anne Zadek

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(43pp)

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Houdini Carini is a charming picture book with a matter-of-fact, lucid reminder that mastery takes time.

In her picture book *Houdini Carini*, Anne Zadek presents Houdini, an eager girl whose parents are magicians and who discovers that shortcuts lead to mistakes. It's a timeless lesson for preschoolers that reveals the wisdom in slowing down and doing what's often hardest: beginning at the beginning.

Inspired by feats with fanciful names, like the Astounding Illusion of the Whispering Sphinx, Houdini decides to follow family tradition. On her birthday, she's gifted a cape, wand, hat, and book. Not content to learn what she considers to be "baby stuff," Houdini decides she's seen enough magic to try advanced tricks. After a few failed attempts, her parents advise her to turn to the book's first page, which states: "Begin at the beginning. Start small. Practice makes perfect." It's only when Houdini follows directions and puts forth effort that she finds rewards.

With its gentle narration, the book never turns Houdini's confidence into outright hubris. Her natural enthusiasm, realistic impatience, and innocence serve as motivation. Setbacks only push her to keep trying. The familiar message on learning new things one step at a time tends toward the formulaic; though the book centers on magic, the behind-the-scenes struggle keeps some of Houdini's sense of wonder at a distance.

Still, the message is refreshed across entertaining situations. Each successive trick results in greater disruption. The Extremely Ambitious Everlasting Fountain Trick is especially outlandish; it leads to a well-timed page turn and a scene of exaggerated chaos that involves fire hydrants. For kids, the broad humor is appealing. For adults, the writing includes subtler, deadpan touches, such as "The cards did not obey."

Homespun, busy illustrations feature doll-like figures and clever details that highlight Houdini's difficulties. The magic book, which she shoves under her bed, is nearly as large as the bed itself, suggesting its daunting nature. Scenes that include a deck of cards emphasize Houdini's lack of control by scattering them across the page.

Still, the art is not polished. In a show-and-tell scene, children's hands vary in size and form, and feet cast unlikely shadows in a well-lit classroom. Tables and chairs alternate between curved and straight legs, thin and thick tabletops. Character designs are also inconsistent; Houdini's father is lashless in most scenes but not in a dinner table tableau. The distance between a wall clock and a doorway shifts from one living room scene to the next.

Houdini Carini is a charming picture book with a matter-of-fact, lucid reminder that mastery takes time. Houdini's foibles and her parents' honest guidance add up to a warm portrait of making magic.

KAREN RIGBY (December 20, 2018)

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