ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

How the Russian Snow Maiden Helped Santa Claus
Gail Buyske
Natasha Veronina, illustrator
Natasha Voronina, illustrator
Vernissage Press
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This story doubles a child's anticipation for Christmas with the telling of what happens when Father Frost, the Russian Santa Claus, sends Snegurochka the Snow Maiden to help Santa Claus make toys for Christmas Eve. Father Frost parts with his helper willingly, since "Russian children do not open their presents until New Year's."

Snegurochka is excited about her trip and tries hard to be a good helper to Santa Claus. In fact, she takes her responsibilities so seriously that she feels inadequate and tries to hide her homesickness from Santa. At night, she comforts herself by playing with the *matryoshka*, or nesting, doll that Father Frost gave her as a going away present, but when the smallest piece gets lost, she cries herself to sleep.

Santa overhears and comes to comfort her the next morning with a breakfast of Christmas cookies. The Snow Maiden fears he thinks she is "just a little girl after all" and waits for him to call "Dasher, Dancer, Donder, and Blitzen to take her back to the Russian North Pole." Instead, Santa sits on the missing piece and discovers an exciting new toy for the children of the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, Snegurochka learns that Father Frost was right to tell her, "Just do your best and be yourself."

Originally from Japan, *matryoshka* dolls were imported to Russia in the 1890's, when they became an instant hit and were adopted as a national treasure. Author Gail Buyske's interest in the dolls dates back to her student days in Russia in the 1970s, and she remains an enthusiastic collector of this unique toy. She recruited illustrator Natasha Voronina because she liked her handcrafted dolls so much. The two met at a craft fair in the town of Sergei Possad, where the first Russian nesting dolls were made more than one hundred years ago.

Designed for readers age four and up, this story introduces Russian customs and vocabulary. The illustrations mimic the woodburning technique used to decorate *matryoshka* dolls and create an authentic look for this appealing, old-fashioned story that any child will love.