Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

I Am Me
Sheila Hale
Kenny Estrella, illustrator
XLibris
978-1-4691-9312-0
Three Stars (out of Five)

Young children are very self-centered, and appropriately so, according to retired social worker Sheila Hale. A major developmental task of early childhood is to differentiate oneself from others, and children do it by comparing themselves to the people and things in the world around them. Hale acknowledges and celebrates the development of self-awareness in her debut children's book, *I Am Me*.

Writing with her grandchildren in mind, Hale offers a self-esteem boost along with lessons for living with others. The young narrator, who could be any little boy—indeed, Hale has left him unnamed—wonders exactly what he is. Is he a dog? A lion? No, that couldn't be. But he is a boy who has a lot of fun with the people around him, even if he does have to follow a few rules now and then.

Illustrator Kenny Estrella draws the boy's face large, making it feel like one is talking to a child at eye level. Large blue eyes look out directly at the reader as the boy talks about his friends and family. Estrella uses a colorful but calming palette of turquoise, orchid, and sage. His modern style—lots of spiked hair and huge, anime-style eyes everywhere—keeps the action alive.

Hale's writing sometimes seems secondary to the larger-than-life pictures that flood the borders of the page. The language is simple: "My little sister's name is Emmy. She is a girl." Thus most of the book feels appropriate for parents and grandparents to read with their toddlers and preschoolers. Later passages, however, are more sophisticated. Hale writes about kids learning to share, planting a garden, drawing pirate ships, and putting on magic shows. This suggests an audience that's a bit older, so perhaps the book could be read to a range of ages.

Clearly meant as a read-aloud book, Hale does not appear to be too concerned with

textual issues like punctuation and capitalization. As one phrase flows into the next and keeps the pages turning, the lack of periods at the end of apparent sentences seems insignificant. Several passages presented in all capitalized letters, however, suggest shouting, which conflicts with the overall positive tone of the book.

Hale's sparse writing does open up space for lots of questions and observations from children. Like the popular Elf-help Books for Kids, *I Am Me* is less of a story with a moral than an invitation for kids to explore their emotions, perceptions, and relationships in a supportive atmosphere.

Sheila M. Trask