ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

PICTURE BOOKS

Ibakon, Gretl and the Stinky, Sticky Dragon
Susan Anderson Coons
Bruce W. Nelson, illustrator
Xlibris
978-1-4415-8469-4
Four Stars (out of Five)

The "village folk" have a problem: Bully Bear is tearing up their fields and attacking their sheep, and there doesn't seem to be a way to stop him. Everyone is afraid.

Meanwhile, an unlikely friendship has blossomed between Ibakon, a village sled dog, and one of the "forest folk," a snowshoe hare named Gretl; Ibakon has saved Gretl's life by freeing her foot from a trap, thus building the first bridge between forest and village. The friendship between the two creates unease in the forest, as the animals are sure that Ibakon's presence will lead the village folk to enter their domain and cause them harm.

The problem goes still deeper: the reason Bully Bear is so angry is that although he would love to sink his teeth into the salmon that Ibakon's master, Lars, has strung in a tree, it is the dog's duty to guard them. "You're the best 'bear dog' in the whole village," Lars often tells him, filling the dog's heart with pride. The village folk are in despair after Bully's latest attack, and their priest calls them to prayer, hoping for an answer that will rid them of the bear forever.

In the forest, the animals have convened their own meeting; Ibakon suggests that they also pray to the Great One Above. Calmed by the prayer, the animals suggest creative ideas and work together to create the "stinky, sticky dragon" that finally solves their problem.

Susan Anderson Coons has created a multi-layered story that takes on some of the big issues children must face as they grow: social interaction between members of groups that fear and dislike each other, bullying, and the use of creative imagination and teamwork to solve problems too big for individuals to handle alone. "Ideas, not grumbles," and, "More things get done when we share ideas than when we complain," says Mayor Moose. Parents who pray will be grateful for the author's depiction of prayer as a means to calm fear and anxiety, and the descriptions of Alaskan birds and animals included at the end of the story make answering children's questions about them easy.

Nelson's illustrations are bright, lively, and expressive, and the book would be enhanced

by having them all appear in color. Overall, careful layout keeps the text readable against the background, but it is visually confusing on page seven, and on page twenty it appears that Mayor Moose has incorrectly been called “Morris.” While the lengthy text on some pages might intimidate early readers, the book is a wonderful read-aloud selection that is sure to open the door to lively discussions of timely and complex issues.

Kristine Morris