



Jack and the Lean Stalk

Raven Howell

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Jack and the Lean Stalk is an empowering alternative fairy tale in which a brave young boy welcomes a giant in need.

Raven Howell's picture book *Jack and the Lean Stalk* celebrates the joys of taking chances in friendships.

Jack, the son of the Garbanzos, is a skilled carpenter, but a clumsy farmer. His family's bean fields are languishing. When a giant appears, other children shun him because of his looks. The giant retreats to the Garbanzo's bean field, where his tears ruin the bean stalks. Jack befriends the giant and brainstorms ways to return the giant home. Through the clever use of his woodworking skills, Jack builds a grand staircase.

This sympathetic story is an unusual reimagining of what happened in the fairy tale's aftermath. Humanizing the giant leads to useful lessons about kindness and inclusivity. Changing Jack from a vengeful, thieving boy into a helpful figure also reforms him as a role model. Still, the book's messages are unsubtle: it introduces a "lonely, bullied giant," and Jack is passionate in declaring that "No one has given the giant an opportunity—he's not that different from the rest of us!"

The book's opening is brisk and precise, but the text soon becomes more descriptive. The giant's extended explanations about what happened to him slow the pace. When the Garbanzos invite the giant home while the staircase is under construction, there's a lighthearted, indoor camping scene that highlights Jack's unhesitating acceptance of others.

The book's art focuses on the Garbanzos, the giant, and the village. It includes entertaining fairy tale cameo appearances, with bears, a gingerbread boy, and Cinderella's mice. Its airbrushed appearance leads to muddled lines, though: the villagers blend into the candy house behind them; in crowd scenes, bodies bleed into one another. The book's landscapes are variously impressionistic, blurry, and cartoonish, while the giant remains green and of monstrous proportions.

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KAREN RIGBY (May 13, 2020)

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