

Just an Ordinary Elephant and The Bald Cardinal: Stories #2 and #3 from Squirrel Hill

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Ray Driver, Illustrator

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Just an Ordinary Elephant and The Bald Cardinal is a lovely addition to the Squirrel Hill series of read-aloud tales.

In a peaceful clearing down an old dirt road sits a farmhouse inhabited by a medley of lively friends in Paul Sleman Clark's *Just an Ordinary Elephant and The Bald Cardinal*, volume two in the Squirrel Hill series of read-aloud adventures for children.

In "Just an Ordinary Elephant," or Story #2, Ellie the elephant overhears some disparaging comments about how unremarkable he is. Determined to prove himself just as amazing as the mighty African elephant, he begins a humorous effort of transformation involving a scarecrow, a spider, and a large straw hat. Later, Kitty the cat cheers up a sad bird in "The Bald Cardinal," or Story #3.

The slim volume opens with an invitation to visit idyllic Squirrel Hill anytime. Each tale in the series is complete and independent, featuring different character combinations of the Hill's residents. The numbered stories range in length, with "Just an Ordinary Elephant" longer by far than "The Bald Cardinal," which has just a page or two of text. Meant to be shared aloud with a "reader" and "listener," their rolling cadences and intimate tones generate a cozy atmosphere for storytelling.

Gray scale drawings by Ray Driver are interspersed throughout, including a detailed map of Squirrel Hill and the surrounding countryside. An old tire swing, duck pond, weather vane, and outhouse create a comfortably classic country scene.

Although the stories are meant to be read in any order, there are references to prior events in the artwork and throughout the narrative. Set amid apple trees and cornfields, the exact location and nature of the locales may still be questionable for newcomers. A compass rose points towards "North Africa"—which, if accurate, would place the Hill in Kenya or thereabouts, supported by the inclusion of an elephant and monkey as main characters.

Similarly, it is not immediately clear whether all animals are able to speak and interact with all humans or if this is limited to Madison, the only human mentioned in this installment. Monk-Monk, a monkey, wears an army uniform complete with chevron sergeant stripes and envelope hat, while Ellie's proportions are more appropriate for a stuffed toy. Aunt Mabel and Uncle Doc—a cow and horse, respectively—live in a barn and eat grass, but there is a duck with spectacles and a deerstalker hat, and a rabbit with an apron and broom. It is possible that some are real and others imagined, but there are no clarifications in the text.

Both stories use gentle humor and themes of friendship and self-acceptance. The dangers of gossip and careless words are also explored in both, although, cleverly, from different perspectives: first from Ellie's point of view when he overhears something negative about himself, and later from Kitty's, as she attempts to build a cardinal's low self-

esteem. Valuable life lessons and positive morals are present but not overt. These stories are the perfect length for character building exercises or values education programs.

Just an Ordinary Elephant and The Bald Cardinal is a lovely addition to the Squirrel Hill series of read-aloud tales, with fresh new characters and heartwarming adventures.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (October 19, 2018)

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