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Latasha and the Kidd on Keys

Michael Scotto
Evette Gabriel, illustrator
Midlandia Press (Mar 19, 2013)
Softcover $10.99 (254pp)
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Latasha Gandy, the precocious, dynamic protagonist of *Latasha and the Little Red Tornado*, is back in this winning sequel by Michael Scotto. She's busier than ever with her mom, friends, a new gifted-and-talented program, and of course, her charming and energetic dog, Ella Fitzgerald.

Even though she loves her hardworking mother, Latasha is starting to think more and more about her father, Patrick Kidd, a musician who has had only a minimal presence in her life. Though her mother has reservations, Latasha is thrilled when there is an opportunity to get to know him. Patrick even helps Latasha with her school project. Excited as she is to be spending time with her dad, Latasha struggles with her disappointment when Patrick is late or cancels their visits. When it counts the most, will her dad prove he really wants to be there for her—and that he truly loves her?

Through Latasha's story, Scotto showcases his ability to present reality with honesty, empathy, and humor. By carefully illustrating the emotions and multiple sides of characters, Scotto captures the complexity of Latasha's situation. Latasha may want to spend time with her father, but she also has an ideal vision of what she wants him to be. Similarly, Patrick cares for Latasha but doesn't really understand his role in her life.

Scotto also understands that reality doesn't always have the perfect endings readers might expect. What he delivers instead is all the more valuable. His touches of poignancy and authentic, loving relationships won't sugarcoat reality but instead will show how family and friends (and perhaps an affectionate puppy) can help ease life's troubles. Latasha's very own version of a happy ending is found among those she loves most.

The significant meaning and emotions in *Latasha and the Kidd on Keys* are written into a completely approachable story. While occasionally the message may be a bit subtle, the book is a strong choice for middle-grade readers. Many of the subplots regarding Ella Fitzgerald and Latasha's project are lighter vehicles for humor and important messages about teamwork and friendship. Latasha's voice and dialogue are precious, and they may sound a bit older than her nine years, but the text has an appropriate feel. Latasha gives names to emotions, and she models behaviors that readers can learn from.

Topped off with a beautiful cover and warm illustrations by Evette Gabriel, *Latasha and the Kidd on Keys* is a touching book with a satisfying ending. Readers will hope that Scotto keeps sharing Latasha's adventures for children to learn from and enjoy.

ALICIA SONDHI (February 28, 2013)

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