

Latasha and the Little Red Tornado

Michael Scotto

Evette Gabriel, Illustrator

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Eight-year-old Latasha Gandy has a lot on her mind. Her mother is trying hard to be a successful nurse's aide, which leaves her little time and energy for Latasha. Mrs Okocho, their downstairs neighbor and landlord, is willing to babysit (or young lady sit, as Latasha calls it) but her cooking is strange and smelly. Finally, Latasha's dog, Ella Fitzgerald, has too much energy to behave well in their apartment. Latasha worries that Mrs. Okocho will grow sick and tired of listening to the dog run laps around the apartment and insist the small family find a new place to live.

Luckily Latasha makes a new friend, Ricky, with whom she can talk over her problems while they take Ella for long walks in the afternoon. But even that relationship turns sour over an incident at school. At least Latasha can count on Ella to make her laugh—until a tragedy occurs that almost takes away that friendship, too.

Michael Scotto, author of several books for children, writes with simple charm about the complexities of the life of a precocious third grader. His sense of childhood emotions is pitch perfect; moments that don't even register on an adult's plane of perception can have far-reaching implications for kids. For instance, when Latasha's mother is too tired to play a game with her daughter, Latasha takes it as an indication that life has changed irreparably. Scotto understands the value of moments like these and uses them to great effect.

He is also talented at examining relationships, both the human and the human-canine variety. One of the sweetest aspects of the book is the love Latasha has for her dog. Scotto does not, however, fall into a saccharine trap of applying human emotion to the dog. "If Ella was my friend, then why had she wrecked my special dinner last night?... The point was that I had a plan to do something special and perfect, and Ella had ruined it. Didn't she know that best friends don't hurt each other?" Ella hurts Latasha's feelings with some of her puppy antics, and understanding that dogs need a different set of parameters for behavior is one of the ways Latasha matures during the story.

Dynamic pencil drawings by Evette Gabriel bring the humor to life and add an extra layer of interest to the book.

Middle readers will appreciate seeing themselves in the quick-paced story; parents will like the questions the book raises about responsibility and friendship. A winning addition to children's literature.

ANDI DIEHN (October 19, 2011)

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