

Martha May McKenzie: And the Magic Cake Big Mistake!

Brian Starr

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Children with a magical grandmother learn about respect, friendship, and accepting personal responsibility in Martha May McKenzie, Brian Starr's fantastical, adventure-filled novel for young readers.

Brian Starr's playful fantasy novel *Martha May McKenzie* is filled with magic in the diverse forms of candy, broom bristles, strange creatures, witches, trolls, and time travel.

Martha May McKenzie is an uncommon grandmother with wild hair and magical abilities. She runs the Witch's Brew, a coffee shop from which wonderful smells waft out. At the story's beginning, Billy—a boy who loves candy and refuses to eat vegetables—enters her shop, scarfs down a magical lollipop, and turns into a frog. It's the first of several instances in the book where cause-and-effect relationships are emphasized; later, the stakes rise to the point of being life or death.

Then, when Martha's grandchildren visit after having lost their father, she tries to cheer them up by sharing a family secret: she's a witch. But Martha's daughter Jamie is a nonbeliever who doesn't want her children subjected to the idea of magic. When the family is faced with danger, though, belief and trust become more necessary.

The story moves with engaging speed, with the exception of one unusual chapter that stretches toward a twenty-page length. The book's otherwise swift, dynamic chapters feature adventures like a dragon attack during which the sisters who assist—though in a manner that is kept vague—are rewarded for their efforts with the privilege of living in a castle. But two secondary characters who are absent for long stretches of the book are also made responsible for the story's final scenes; it's a jarring, underexplained narrative choice.

Still, the prose is playful, active, and infused with humor. It delights in surprises like a goat that wears glasses, flatulence made of sparkles, and Martha's favorite expression of displeasure: "cinnamon sticks." It also indulges in age-appropriate grossness, with instances of yellow rain, burp clouds, and "goopy loogies." Whimsical black-and-white sketches complement the story, illuminating features like a hatching bird, Martha's family's arrival at her home, and a dragon. And in the sometimes onomatopoeic text, standout phrases appear in bolder, bigger text.

People's actions have consequences in the humor-infused fantasy novel *Martha May McKenzie*, in which children with a magical grandmother learn about respect, friendship, and accepting personal responsibility.

SHARI MARSHALL (December 28, 2023)

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