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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ JUVENILE FICTION

Mary's Cat

Kathleen E. Bardsley
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The lives of the Holy Family are seen up close and personal through the eyes of a loyal pet cat named Fearless. Intended for readers between the ages of ten and fourteen, *Mary's Cat* follows the exploits of a hardscrabble kitten lucky enough to be adopted by Mary, the mother of Jesus. The runt of his litter and the least attractive of the lot, the cat becomes acquainted with Mary when Mary rescues the stray cat from the upper limbs of a tree, giving the wayward animal its first taste of human kindness. Soon after, the cat witnesses the angel's visitation upon Mary, when the young virgin first learns what God has in store for her. When Mary is promptly stalked by a deadly snake, the cat attacks it, thus earning his new name: Fearless.

Mary and Fearless become inseparable companions, and thus it is through Fearless's eyes that the next twenty years of Mary's life unfold. Adhering to story lines as they are set forth in the four Gospels, Bardley's tale hits on the major highlights of Mary's life: her betrothal to Joseph, the trek into Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, the family's flight into Egypt, and their return to Nazareth, where the child Jesus excels in his studies at the synagogue and follows in Joseph's footsteps as a carpenter. In what feels like an abrupt conclusion to the tale, the story then comes to a sudden end with the death of Joseph and the implication that Fearless, too, has passed beyond the earthly realm.

At its best, *Mary's Cat* allows for a whimsical approach to some of the most oft told stories of the New Testament, helping young readers to better imagine those long ago times. And Fearless is a companionable narrator, whose steady eye and observations on human ways allow for an occasional dose of gentle humor, like when he points out that "the human birth process is another example of why cats are the superior species." Whether young readers are already familiar with these Bible stories or coming to them for the first time, *Mary's Cat* offers renditions of the tales that both remain faithful to the original source and add a layer of fancy to capture those younger imaginations.

At its worst, however, *Mary's Cat* is not as richly imagined or as deeply engaging as one hopes children's literature will be. With no illustrations to augment the text, it cannot be said that these ancient environments truly come alive on the page, or that any of the characters come across as fully developed personalities. Unfortunately, this is largely due to the weakness of the story line itself, which essentially has no plot, no central problem for the characters to confront and resolve. The story, after all, does not lead toward the crucifixion of Jesus, but the death of Joseph and the cat.

A retelling of New Testament stories as seen through the lens of a pet, *Mary's Cat* is imaginative in its own right.

DIANE TAYLOR (February 17, 2011)

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