

## Max the Mouse and the Secret of Mars

**Michael Cantwell**

iUniverse (Dec 14, 2016)

\$13.99 (108pp)

978-1-5320-0942-6

*Max the Mouse and the Secret of Mars is an easy adventure that introduces deep topics.*

Michael Cantwell's *Max the Mouse and the Secret of Mars* is a fun adventure that explores feelings of loneliness and the search for acceptance while subtly underscoring the importance of being yourself and protecting your home environment.

Max is a pet store mouse who lives a contented life with his owner, Melissa, a nine-year-old social pariah who spends all of her time teaching Max tricks.

One day, Max escapes from his home—with the intent of returning—in order to explore and sate his curiosity. He gets lost, however, and winds up dragged into the dramatic life of street rats, who suffer at the hands of humans and cats.

Max proposes that they build their own society—first in the forest and then on Mars. Though life in the forest feels ideal, they come to realize that they must leave Earth and its dangers for the unoccupied Mars. Taking a tip from Jules Verne, the mice build a hot air balloon that carries them all the way to Mars. Life on Mars is not what the Earth mice expect in any way. There are a series of dramatic events that reveal a dark secret about the planet, and Max and his fellow mice head back to Earth with a better sense of what home means.

Interesting and entertaining, *Max the Mouse* hits all the appropriate marks of a children's book. Tension is well handled and the action moves at the perfect pace to keep attention focused and intrigued. There are evocative illustrations accompanying the text. Max is a relatable lead, a flawed character with a good heart who makes good decisions even after making mistakes and who seeks advice from his friends whenever things feel too overwhelming for him.

The other mice and rats are amusing caricatures of doctors, librarians, politicians, and other human professionals, based on the buildings they lived in on Earth. All characters learn and adapt, and the importance of working together to do the right thing is interwoven throughout. The humorous moments that the mice provide translate well to both parents and young readers. Dialogue is simple but it gets the point across. Max is often witty, the other mice are comedic, and the dialogue always moves the plot forward.

The book has an energetic and engaging pace, and the story holds interest through several setting and tone changes. Underlying messages of self-acceptance and environmentalism are obvious without being overbearing, and provide an important complexity to the text. There is solidly written action and adventure alongside these uplifting messages.

*Max the Mouse and the Secret of Mars* is an easy adventure for young readers that also introduces deeper topics, including lifestyles and the treatment of resources.

SHANA CREANEY (April 4, 2017)

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