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Picture Books

Mr. Maxwells Mouse
Frank Asch
Devin Asch, illustrator
Kids Can Press
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Picture the quiet celebration of a professional promotion, a fine restaurant, and impeccably solicitous service-from the entree itself! Mr. Maxwell, a successful businesscat somewhere in his middle years, “had grown unaccustomed to speaking with his meals.” With consistent use of such pithy understatement, the Vermont-based writer and illustrator with more than sixty childrens books to his credit, tells a delightfully surreal tale of well-bred cat and mouse.

Rather than chase his prey, Mr. Maxwell orders it served to him on a silver platter. Eschewing the waiters offer to take care of killing the meal-as the mouse itself acknowledges, “It would not be catly”-Mr. Maxwell is subjected to the obsequious charms of his intended luncheon.

Like nineteenth-century aristocrats, both diner and dinner follow seemingly immutable social guidelines with grace and aplomb, leading each other and the reader to a collision of ethical questions about social (and biological) norms. This is a traditional story about survival of the wittiest, but it is, perhaps, a metaphor as well, about the social conventions and pre-determined roles that fail in the face of an intimate interaction between individuals.

Generous portraits of corporate feline society at lunch, painted by the authors son in this, their third childrens book collaboration, grace a page and a half of most of the books two-page spreads. Facial expressions and body language-from the main characters, the waiter, the cat ladies in gowns and pearls waltzing on the dance floor-tell the tale with the same convincing, unapologetic juxtaposition of human and animal as does the text. The emotion in each pair of eyes alone makes the book worthwhile. The humor and adventure in this childrens story will captivate youngsters; the sophistication of its subtext will give healthy pause to adults, as well.

Bonnie Deigh