Clarion Review

Picture Books

Ollie
Diane Smiley
AuthorHouse
978-1-4772-1812-9
Three Stars (out of Five)

As a general rule, kids are intrigued by dragons—both the scary kind populating many myths and the friendlier, more helpful sort. The latter description fits Ollie, the subject of Diane Smiley's poetic book of stories.

A grandmother five times over, Smiley has written poetry throughout her life. *Ollie* is composed entirely in rhyming verse.

"Book of poetry" is an accurate description of *Ollie*, but to call it a picture book is a bit of a misnomer. There are only three pages of unique illustrations in the book, with most pages featuring text superimposed over a charming, if unexciting, image of a forest glade with mountains in the far distance. The few nonlandscape illustrations by Jingo M. de la Rosa are excellent, but their limited number is a lost opportunity. The reader only gets a few chances to see illustrations of Ollie and the other characters, despite several sequences that are tailor-made for illustrations, such as young Ollie's escape from an unnamed beast who wants to eat him. Instead, there's a strange contrast between the description of Ollie's daring flight from a mountaintop and the woodsy image behind the words: "On this mountain top high / the sound of a tiny dragon's cry / was heard by a passing airborne beast / who thought a baby dragon would make a great feast."

Another problem with *Ollie* is that its rhyme scheme often seems uncalculated, with different syllable patterns within the stories. This creates a challenge for readers trying to follow the rhythm, since there isn't always a consistent rhythm to follow.

The stories themselves are charming—Ollie meets a new human friend, Mr. Montgomery; Ollie and Mr. Montgomery explore a cave filled with bats; Ollie and Mr. Montgomery befriend a would-be dragon-slaying knight. Smiley offers cute details, like Ollie drying off his friend with a gentle puff of dragon breath and Ollie hiding in a tree when

frightened. Ollie is a character whom children will probably love, but some kids may lose interest as they proceed through page after page of heavy text, waiting for a glimpse of the friendly dragon.

More stories about Ollie would be welcome. In the future, however, Smiley would do well to tell her dragon tales through a stronger relationship between visuals and verse.

Peter Dabbene