

Queen Mariella and the Fable of the Peony

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Some say the peony gets its name from Paeon, physician to the Greek gods. Legend has it that after Paeon healed Hades from an injury using the curative properties of the plant, Hades turned the physician into a peony to save Paeon from the wrath of an enemy god. *Queen Mariella and the Fable of the Peony* explores the distinctive flower's healing powers from the point of view of an insect.

Queen Mariella is the leader of the ants. She is "adored and beloved by all the creatures of the garden." Just before she is to wed her true love, she becomes seriously ill. None of the doctor ants in her colony are able to diagnose or cure her, but her fiancé, Javier, recalls hearing bees buzzing about "a secret wax on a very special flower" that "helped one live a long and natural life." The tale of Javier's quest to obtain this substance for his queen breathes romance into the common garden phenomenon of ants swarming peony buds in the days preceding their bloom.

Queen Mariella and the Fable of the Peony unfolds as part of a conversation between young Diego and his *abuelito*, his grandfather, which takes place while they are gardening. Snappy dialogue gives dimension to the characters; their speech is peppered with Spanish phrases that are easily understood through context clues.

The narration of the tale is less polished than the interaction between the main human characters. Occasional spots of awkward phrasing, like ants scurrying with "the fiercest dedication" rather than "fierce dedication," or wicked spider's traps of "intricately weaved webs" instead of "woven webs" disturb the flow. Certain words and phrases like "pure and natural love" and "knew of no cure" are repeated too often.

A one-page Language Key at the beginning of the book is helpful. Serviceable watercolor illustrations complement the text but add little to the story. The softly textured paintings of the peonies and other plant life are well done, while the human and animal images seem cartoonish and primitive. They don't match the style or quality of their backdrops.

Grandfather tells Diego his garden is "alive with adventure and excitement day in and day out." *Queen Mariella and the Fable of the Peony* lives up to that description, although readers in the upper range of the primary grades will best appreciate the bittersweet ending. Peonies have fascinated humans as far back as Ancient Greece, and this story invites a new audience to appreciate their beauty—and the magic of the ants who swarm them.

CAROLYN BAILEY (February 16, 2012)

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