

Ready, Set, GOrilla!

Melissa Stoller

Sandy Steen Bartholomew, Illustrator

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Melissa Stoller's *Ready, Set, GOrilla!* highlights sportsmanship in an entertaining animal race. Illustrated by Sandy Steen Bartholomew, this picture book for beginning readers explores the concept of fairness on a playground.

The story begins when Gorilla, an exuberant bully, challenges his friends to a race. As each runner is on the cusp of winning, he trips or hits them to ensure his own spot in first place. He ignores their reluctance to play again, and moves on to race Gopher, a spirited creature who doesn't hesitate to point out Gorilla's cheating despite being a cheat himself. Gopher's triumph is short-lived, as a cheetah arrives and bolts at the start of the race, showing both Gorilla and Gopher how it feels when the odds are stacked from the start. Realizing how poorly he treated his friends, Gorilla agrees to establish ground rules before a new race begins.

The book conveys a clear lesson on the golden rule through an everyday scenario. Gorilla's change of heart offers an important lesson in empathy, but his comeuppance feels orchestrated. It's unclear why the gopher and cheetah are both needed to shine a mirror back at Gorilla. Cheetah in particular doesn't appear to have changed, though she's pictured at the end on the merry-go-round with all of the other friends.

Full color spreads enrich the race. From a winding yellow slide to a wooden obstacle course, the playground's equipment is exciting and dangerous: Penguin spirals in the air, and Llama balances at great height. Sometimes divided in panels, at other times spanning both pages, the illustrations emphasize the physicality of the story. Gorilla bears a cartoonish, human-like profile. Other characters sport a more natural look. Bubbles of colorful, emphatic dialogue fill the white space, which sometimes results in a busy layout.

Ready, Set, GOrilla! is a lighthearted take on serious decisions and consequences. Without over-moralizing, the book implicitly shows how the enjoyment of a race lies in the camaraderie gained and in the knowledge of having put forth an honest effort. Gorilla's instinctive desire to win "at any cost" is proven selfish. That his friends forgive him adds to the gentle outcome. While not always true to life, the competition ends with enthusiasm for more.

KAREN RIGBY (October 19, 2018)

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