



Rhymes and Doodles from a Wind-Up Toy

Martha Sears West

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Shel Silverstein, A.A. Milne, and Ogden Nash have a sister-in-rhymes named Martha Sears West. Her poems, like theirs, tickle the funny bone, lift the spirits, and warm the heart. She focuses on the joy and magic of childhood, and how adults can retain a childlike sense of wonder. Some of the poems are purely whimsical; others are poignant; still others seem intended for adults. All are composed with flawless rhythms and inspired rhymes.

“The Fisherman” looks at the long-held tradition of anglers exaggerating their stories of the one that got away, cleverly entreating the reader to consider that one tale about seeing something unusual just might be true: “A man who’d swum out to a shoal,/While holding up his fishing pole,/Was gazing at the sea around,/When suddenly, without a sound,/There appeared two non-conformist/Devil Rays that were enormous!” When proof of the creatures’ existence arrives, the poet cautions: “Not every tale that sounds unreal/Is fabricated out of zeal.”

In “Visitors,” a child takes a dollhouse indoors after the outdoor fairies fail to protect it from destruction by uninvited guests: “The house is in my bedroom now,/Where I can guard the place./You can’t depend on fairies;/I’ll be watching, just in case.”

Some of the poems are clearly not meant for children at all, like “Minimally Invasive Posterior Lumbar Decompression,” a jaunty rhyming ode to the doctor who healed the poet’s aching back, and “Farewell,” a poem in which a father sends a son on his way into adult life, with a bouncing meter and simple rhyme scheme that doesn’t prevent the heartache from coming through: “In part, the talk was serving/to alleviate my fears./Until I learned Japan would be his home/For twenty years.”

The author holds a bachelor’s degree in linguistics from the University of Maryland. Her previous book, *Jake, Dad, and the Worm*, illustrated with watercolor paintings, told the story of a small boy who was inspired by a heroic worm. In this volume, her line drawings are simple and clear, well-proportioned and appealing, reminiscent of Shel Silverstein’s goofy kids and Ernest Shepard’s charming depictions of Christopher Robin.

This book is an absolute delight. The rhymes and accompanying doodles run the spectrum of human emotion, from the giggling nonsense of “Now They Know” (“I said something foolish,/And feared they knew it was me;/So I hid my head in a paper bag/And walked into a tree”) to the sad nostalgia of “The Best Christmas” to the sheepish self-awareness of “Change” (“There are things about myself/I ought to rearrange./Instead, I shuffle furniture;/It’s easier to change.”).

The “Wind-Up Toy” of the title refers to an introspective poem in which the author insists that she does just as she pleases, but winds up admitting: “Even when I think that I’m/The one in charge of me,/Conditions out of my control/Are winding up my key.”

West deserves a place on the bookshelf alongside Nash and Milne, whose classic poetry carries timeless reflections on the universal condition of being a sensitive human being.

KAREN MCCARTHY (March 17, 2011)

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