ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

Roberta's Vacation
Silvia Francia
Laura McKenna, translator
Kane/Miller Book Publishers
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Roberta is one bored puppy! Vacationing with Nanna and Gramps is not much fun. Roberta wants to go to the beach, but is confined to the house while her grandparents nap. When Roberta runs out of patience, she takes off on a solo trip to the beach with a bottle of “fizzy” water tied around her neck.

The walk to the beach is longer and more harrowing than Roberta expects. While still a block from the sand Roberta comes face to face with Jerome, a dog so ferocious that even the “fizzy” water bubbles at the sight of his enormous, jagged teeth. Roberta turns around and runs the other way until she collapses, exhausted on a sandy shore. To calm herself, Roberta drinks some water, has a little swim and then settles inside a shady drainpipe. Roberta’s respite is short-lived because Jerome arrives and devours a picnic lunch near Roberta, now fearfully quaking within the drainpipe. As soon as Jerome downs his garlic sausages (with plenty of mustard, of course) he dashes into the water. Obviously, Jerome does not know the rule about waiting for one’s food to digest before swimming and soon he’s vanished beneath the surface. Shaking off her fear, watchful Roberta races to the rescue, pulls Jerome from the bottom and hauls him to shore. Gratefully, Jerome acknowledges Roberta’s efforts and invites her to become his friend.

The full-page, color illustrations extend the story and contribute to the humor of the simple text that is printed across the bottom of the pages. A first reading will be sufficient to grow attached to the expressive Roberta, alternately bored, elated, tired and frightened. During subsequent readings, children will notice the many details such as the mouse sneaking away with a piece of cheese while Roberta gets her water bottle from the refrigerator. During Roberta's walk, she is joined by a small bird whose movements and expressions mimic hers for the remainder of the story. While Roberta shivers in the drainpipe, the pictures show a rounded view as if the reader has joined the dog in observing Jerome from this safe spot. Pair this book with one of Susan Meddaugh's tales about talking dog, Martha, or any of Gene Zion's stories about Harry for a doggone good time.

The author/illustrator's first picture book was originally published in France in 1996. A paperback Spanish Edition (ISBN 980-257-222-5 $6.95) is also being released. Francia is working on another book; we can hope it will be about Roberta's new friendship.

Janis Ansell