

## Scarlet's Magic Paintbrush

**Melissa Stoller**

**Sandie Sonke, Illustrator**

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*With its read-aloud pleasure, Scarlet's Magic Paintbrush appeals to the artist in everyone.*

Perfection gives way to creativity in *Scarlet's Magic Paintbrush*, the story of a girl who loses her initial delight at producing accomplished art with the help of a special brush. Melissa Stoller, together with illustrator Sandie Sonke, adroitly portrays the freedom that comes when a child discovers the power of her own ideas.

When Scarlet finds a magic brush, she realizes it can recreate whatever she asks it to paint. Impressed by the results, she's at a loss once the brush is misplaced. Her parents reassure her. Supplied with different brushes, Scarlet tries again, but none of her family can guess her subjects. Scarlet tries painting left-handed, making her own brush, and finger-painting. Once she finds the magic brush again, she concludes that it can't replicate her detailed visions. She decides to paint herself. What at first seemed like a gift becomes an obstacle, but it nonetheless inspires growth.

The imaginative plot speaks to Scarlet's insecurities as well as her increasing confidence. Her unspoken fear of not being good enough and of being misunderstood morph into an empowering realization that it's okay to branch out. Though Scarlet remains unaware of what's happening to her, all of her experiments—successful or not—lay a foundation as well as a habit of practicing. Painting in new ways sharpens her critical eye.

Sonke's expressive illustrations portray Scarlet as a free-spirited child wearing a flower crown. Vibrant scenes reveal the changes in her work. Canvases produced by the magic brush take on traditional fantasy material, such as a unicorn and a princess. Canvases that portray Scarlet's attempts reveal rougher strokes, abstraction, and later, similar fantasy subjects with her own less perfect but still definable flair. Details beyond the story—including stylish, seemingly artistic parents and a whimsical, retro home—provide a rich backdrop for Scarlet's play. An upbeat palette that combines sparkling pastels for the magic brush and bolder choices for Scarlet's folksy masterpiece enhance the tale.

There's little sense of tidy pop psychology in Scarlet's revelation; the changes in her view arrive through effort. The clear arc is subtle in its life lessons and heartening in its portrayal of trust in oneself. There's also never a sense that the book renders judgment on what constitutes good or bad art: what matters is the process. With its read-aloud pleasure, *Scarlet's Magic Paintbrush* appeals to the artist in everyone.

KAREN RIGBY (September 28, 2018)

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