ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

Small One's Adventure
Doris L. Mueller
Lisa Tooker, editor
Parker Fulton, illustrator
All About Kids
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A thirsty elephant herd storms toward the river, stampeding faster and faster as they pick up the smell of water. Small One moves safely amid the tall, gray legs of the adults. Protected by the dynamics of the family circle, she gains more confidence than she can handle at her young age. Caught up in a desperate struggle to gain independence and maturity, the elephant calf creates a dire situation for herself.

In her eagerness to show the herd her grown-up capabilities, Small One ignores the perils of the river and goes too far. She openly declares her right to be in control of her own playtime, ignoring the warning signals of a watchful mother. She thinks nothing of the impending danger as she watches a pair of twins carefully navigate the slippery mud, their trunks firmly wrapped around the tail of nearby “aunties.” As she reluctantly obeys her mother’s call, Small One attempts to climb the muddy riverbank and discovers that her steadfast insistence on her independence could cost her very own life.

The author, a semi-retired college professor, writes this book from personal observations made on an African adventure of her own. Having noted a young elephant calf’s expressions and carefree patterns, Mueller weaves a tender yet suspenseful story of youthful impatience and the inherent consequences of impetuous choices. She cautiously steps inside the elephant’s family unit to document the physical and emotional interactions characteristic of a matriarchal society.

Mueller's true-to-life portrayal of the excursion to the watering hole is quite realistic. She magnifies every meaningful detail in the herd's behavioral makeup and carefully identifies their communication style. They stomp, spray, swing, and moan-with a distinct significance for every action. The book's title falls short on the surface, for Small One's story, written for ages four through eight, is not a mere adventure, but an authentic incident in the perilous jungle, with lessons that can apply to human readers.

The illustrator, a seasoned wildlife artist, opens up Small One's world in her outstanding pictures. The tension built into the story's climax is just as evident in her illustrations, complete with a full range of emotions easily translatable into human terms. Every double-page spread, adorned with a double band of colorful African motifs and designs, artistically amplifies the environmental setting for Mueller's dramatic text, adding a believable dose of cultural flavor throughout.

Charisse Floyd