



## Stories from Squirrel Hill: Book One

**Paul Sleman Clark**

**Ray Driver, Illustrator**

Ozymandias Publishing

(78pp)

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*This elegantly designed softcover gathers timeless tales set in an idyllic setting where roaming is possible.*

Paul Sleman Clark's *Stories from Squirrel Hill* gathers six lighthearted adventures for chapter book readers, using charmed writing and expressive black-and-white art to deliver gentle life lessons on learning to accept disappointment, kindness, and friendship.

Madison lives on a farm with her talking plush animals Kitty; Ellie, a cautious elephant; and Monk Monk, a monkey from North Africa who styles himself in military uniform. This elegantly designed softcover includes two of the previous volumes in the Squirrel Hill series along with three new stories that together encompass an idyllic setting where roaming is possible. The place is free of adults except for a storyteller, who takes on a benign advisory role.

The stories include Madison's attempt to reach North Africa; a bullying raccoon who favors marshmallows; and Ellie's belief that he isn't special enough. Their conflicts are clear and are resolved using patience. Messages are positive throughout. In the case of the bully, a change toward becoming nicer is driven less by remorse than by the promise of reward—a realistic result, if not a solid model.

The book pays fond tribute to literary favorites including Winnie the Pooh, whose Hundred Acre Wood finds its counterpart in the quaint Briar Woo—an intentional mispronunciation of “wood” that implies a very young child's christening of a beloved locale. That atmosphere is echoed in details that range from a map illustration to measured, proper dialogue that makes the plush animals seem as worried and complex as humans.

Perfesser, a know-it-all goose who carries a book, is a pleasing nod to Roger Duvoisin's *Petunia*, another fowl with a penchant for doling out questionable wisdom. Such references add a rich layer for adults while introducing younger audiences to a nostalgic world. When the work does bring in moments that step out of its timelessness, they seem out of place, including a mention of gossiping birds “tweeting all their friends” that is difficult not to interpret in the context of social media.

*Squirrel Hill* is enhanced by illustrations that feature anthropomorphized wildlife. Whether they depict a rabbit wearing an apron and beating a carpet or Perfesser sporting a deerstalker hat, there's humor and gracefulness to their line work. Ellie's portrayal is especially appealing when he finds himself covered in leaves or floating in a creek.

With their pure sensibility that relishes the countryside, *Stories from Squirrel Hill* is a welcome read-aloud escape.

KAREN RIGBY (May 24, 2019)

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