Clarion Review

Picture Books

The Adventures of Hero Hugs and Kitty Kisses
Genevieve Votra
AuthorHouse
978-1-4208-0561-1
Two Stars (out of Five)

Even a small bear and a cute kitten can change the world. It doesn't take much—just love for others, a passion for community, and a commitment to environmental stewardship. A new book by Genevieve Votra, *The Adventures of Hero Hugs and Kitty Kisses*, shows children how to make a difference.

In this chapter book for new readers, Hero Hugs, a young bear, befriends Kitty Kisses, a feral house cat. Hero Hugs works to improve their forest home by building stone bridges, planting berries, and more. As the two friends serve their community, they discover Hero Hugs' long-lost mother in a zoo. They launch a complicated mission to rescue her and the other zoo animals. Once freed, the creatures create a forest utopia. All is peaceful until humans turn part of the forest into a campground and an untended fire destroys the forest. Hero Hugs and Kitty Kisses must move the animals and recreate the happy community they had before.

Votra, a devoted grandmother and avid reader, presents a book with a gentle heart and a contemporary message. Unfortunately, her inexperience as an author shows. Positive themes of friendship, environmental stewardship, leadership, and community resonate throughout the story, but those messages become preachy, such as when people build the campground. One character states, "Maybe if they see that we are living in the trees…they won't break our homes." Although Votra's characters often act as positive role models, they seem underdeveloped. Even more problematic, their names are far too immature for their personalities.

A few other issues weaken Votra's strong story concept. Passive language, stilted dialogue, and a predictable plot weaken readers' interest. Occasional inconsistencies in the vocabulary level and complexity of the sentence structure prove problematic. "We must be alert and ready to flee at any time," says one character. And Kitty Kisses, the story says, would "bring encouragement to all the animals that were locked up in cages." Sadly, children's

everyday concerns remain unaddressed while political issues drive the story. Additionally, more polished art would give the book a much needed professional finish. However, the plot does contain strong action sequences, which keep the story moving.

Overall this book boasts a warmth that will remind readers of the bedtime stories Grandma used to tell. Children will gain an understanding of environmental stewardship and learn more about their personal responsibility in making the world a better place to live. It is an interesting idea, but this book simply feels like a first draft.

Diane Gardner