Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

The Balloon of Discovery
Steve Sheridan
AuthorHouse
978-1-4817-9025-3
Two Stars (out of Five)

This educational primer for youth is disguised as fanciful fiction offering a bit of magic and mystery.

Steve Sheridan's first children's book, *The Balloon of Discovery*, is a bit of fanciful fiction disguising an educational primer about caring for the environment. The story follows a young sister and brother, Alice and Tom, as they chase a magic balloon through an ever-changing landscape, offering numerous opportunities for observation of everyday environmental hazards.

The balloon stops at strategic places along the way, and mysterious young guides appear to offer the children nature-friendly advice about recycling, water conservation, and air and water pollution. The topics are timely and important. The book was initially published in the United Kingdom, however, and some of the advice, such as directions for the separating of recyclables, does not necessarily apply to readers in the United States.

Intended for young grade-school students, *The Balloon of Discovery* is severely hindered by its lack of illustrations. The story speaks of bright colors, magic and mystery, and Alice and Tom's feelings of "wonder and amazement" as they fly "further than they could ever have imagined," but the excitement and enthusiasm feel oddly flat without the accompanying illustrations that young readers have come to expect. So much of any book for young children depends on the integration of story and image, and the lack of pictures here does a great disservice to a potentially valuable message.

Considering the recent controversy about the environmental impact of balloons, it is curious that Sheridan has chosen a balloon as his vehicle of discovery about environmental issues. The release of balloons on strings, in particular, has been so hotly debated that

encouraging the practice seems not merely incongruous, but environmentally insensitive. In a book about the environment, even a brief discussion about the virtues of latex balloons over Mylar would be perfectly appropriate, and having the children release their balloons without strings, and explaining the reasons for doing so, might serve as a better lesson.

Sheridan's basic message is valid and well-intended, but *The Balloon of Discovery* falls short in delivering that message. In addition to its issue-based content, the text itself needs work. The book would benefit from being edited to remove errors ("they don't their fires don't burn for too long") and incomplete sentences ("Tom saw that corridors in every direction, including where there had been an entrance."). Inconsistencies could also use some attention, including this one; "The tree trunk was now completely sealed again, and Tom saw no gaps," almost immediately followed by, "the running water … came from a gap in the tree,"

There is a good book at the core of this effort, but *The Balloon of Discovery* is not yet ready for a hearty recommendation.

Cheryl Hibbard