ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

The First Music
Dylan Pritchett
Erin Bennett Banks, illustrator
August House
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This fictional tale about the origin of music resounds with sounds of the African jungle: yelping hyenas, hooting owls, screeching parrots, chittering monkeys, and snorting crocodiles. Then one day, when an elephant stubs his foot on a log, he adds a bass note, which becomes an ostinato to the other animals' "notes." Only the frogs are silent—that is, until tale's end.

A renowned storyteller, the author is the president of the National Association of Black Storytellers and a member of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Partners in Education program. Drawing on his experiences in Western Africa, he gives more than two hundred storytelling performances annually, and in this first picture book he uses onomatopoeia and repetition to successfully render the oral tradition of this creation story. "The animals danced and played the first day while the frogs watched. / They pranced and swayed the second day, and the frogs listened. / The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth days, they danced and played so hard that the earth shook. / Except the frogs, who went to their pond to ponder."

The illustrator, who holds degrees in studio art, graphic design, and illustration, made her mark with Bettye Stroud's *The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom*, which won the Oppenheim Toy Portfolio Gold Award. In her thirteen double-page spreads for *The First Music*, she captures the exuberance of the tale with bold strokes of earth-toned acrylic paint. Telling details, such as the elephant's batik head covering and the monkey's jewelry, add to the African flavor. The illustrations and text are well integrated, with the main text set in a larger typeface and details in a smaller font. Colored italics serve for the many sound effects. Initially this variation is distracting, but it could be useful to readers during story hours or elementary music classes, where this book will be a sure-fire hit. "Pada BOOM! BOOM!"

Jeanne M. Lesinski