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Juvenile Fiction

The Genius of Leonardo
Guido Visconti
Bimba Landmann, illustrator
Barefoot Books
978-1-84148-301-6
(August 31, 2000)

“1490. Giacomo has come to live with me. He is ten years old. He is a liar, a thief, and a greedy brute.” So wrote one of the most inventive and accomplished men in history-Leonardo da Vinci. Who better than to tell about the great inventor, scientist, map-maker, painter, and thinker than that little liar and thief, Giacomo, who follows him everywhere?

The narrative, in this handsomely illustrated book, begins when Giacomo gets in trouble by touching models of flying machines patterned after bird wings. The boy is intrigued by his master’s amazing activities and decides to be good so that he will not be sent away. Leonardo-who plays the harp, mirror writes, is ambidextrous, and who designs machines to fly and walk on water-views the child as a nuisance. “He eats as much as two boys and causes as much trouble as four.”

The young apprentice follows Leonardo to the marketplace where they buy up all the caged birds so they can be set free. He watches him paint Mona Lisa, who is entertained by musicians and clowns while she poses. Giacomo is with Leonardo when the Last Supper is painted in tempera on the wall of a friars’ dining room at Santa Maria delle Grazie, and goes with him to France when beckoned by the king.

Landmann's illustrations are evocative of the Medieval Period, which ended only fifty-two years before Leonardo's birth. The highly stylized illustrations have a subdued, solemn, flat quality, with a hint of illumination, contrasting with the Renaissance man's own style of art and his brilliant, futuristic mind. Four book pages show illustrations from Leonardo's notebooks, chronicling his incredible range of interests, abilities, and studies. Landmann is an award-winning illustrator whose A Boy Named Giotto, was selected as one of the Smithsonian's Notable Books for Children in 1999. In addition to incorporating some of Leonardo's famous artwork into the illustrations, the text quotes small passages from his notebooks.

While assiduously faithful to its time period and focused on the genius of Leonardo, the story ends with a nice modern touch that should make young readers smile. As Giacomo and Leonardo look at the stars one night, the great teacher expounds on life, time, and questions such as "how the moon stays up there." Giacomo muses, "And one day men will really be able to fly. Perhaps they will be able to go and see what's up there, on the moon."

Linda Salisbury