

The Happiest Tree: A Yoga Story

Uma Krishnaswami

Ruth Jeyaveeran, Illustrator

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When her class creates a funny new version of “Red Riding Hood” for their class play, Meena gets the part of a tree. A “perfectly clumsy” girl who finds it “hard keeping her arms and legs from moving around,” she fears she can’t pull off even this small role. When she stumbles and trips during rehearsal, her classmates groan in frustration and Meena longs to “fall right through the stage.” Luckily, the adults in Meena’s life have the perfect antidote for her lack of coordination: a yoga class!

In the wake of growing adult interest in yoga, children’s classes are springing up across the country. Like their adult counterparts, children find yoga a pleasurable way to quiet the pressures of everyday life while strengthening their flexibility and control over their bodies. Meena’s story will resonate with many children who feel awkward as their bodies grow, who experience difficulty keeping still, or who are frustrated with their klutziness.

The author, co-director of a National Writing Project program and writer-in-residence at Aztec Ruins National Monument, has written several books for children, including *Chachaji’s Cup*, a Bank Street College Best Children’s Book of the Year, and *Monsoon*, a Parent’s Choice Recommended Book. Krishnaswami paces this story well, so that the reader understands that learning yoga is a process, not an instant change.

Early in her classes, Meena loses balance and even falls. Later, she sees progress, noting, “If I am quiet inside, my body will be still.” The benefits of yoga are clearly presented in simple language, accessible to young readers. Meena’s breathing exercises leave her “calmed down,” and her newfound knowledge about her body “filled her with gladness.” Meena uses her new breathing skills to recover when she trips onstage during the play. She masters her body and becomes “the happiest tree in the whole forest.”

Softly textured acrylic paintings in vibrant colors add to the charm of this offering. The illustrator has also written and illustrated *The Road to Mumbai* and Krishnaswami’s *Monsoon*. Here, her illustrations complement the plot in an expressionistic style, capturing the frustration of Meena’s classmates as she trips, slips, wriggles, and giggles her way through the story as well as her own emotional reactions. The character’s Indian background is seamlessly integrated into the storyline through the beautifully detailed illustrations of her home and the Indian grocery where she discovers yoga.

This “yoga story” is a welcome addition to the very small body of picture books featuring characters of East Indian descent. Meena’s struggle with her own coordination is one faced by most school-aged children at some time, and will be enjoyed by that audience. Meena’s story answers the question “Why yoga?” and belongs in libraries, bookstores, and anywhere else the question might be asked!

CAROLYN BAILEY (August 18, 2009)

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