

The Helium Table

E. Dorinda Shelley

Eleanor A. Hutton, Illustrator

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This conceptually unique story explores the fantastical origins of an everyday feature of a child's house.

E. Dorinda Shelley's *The Helium Table* is a fantastical children's book that explores the downsides of a tidy home.

Kath's family has a table that's always littered with heavy books and mail. Kath's father claims it's a helium table, and the family learns what this all really means when they set out to clean it up and the table flies out the front door!

The story is make-believe and involves plenty of quirky, imaginative world-building elements, but they don't all transpire logically within the story world. The table doesn't start floating until Kath's mother removes the last book from it, yet loading the table with farm animals—including pigs, cows, and horses—isn't enough to keep it from floating away.

Many details are unclear: how big the table actually is, why it's made of helium, and why Kath's mother set about cleaning it up when her husband said that it would float away. These unanswered questions disrupt the magic of the story and make it difficult to follow the events as they play out.

Kath is the narrator, though their age, gender, or other identifying features are not defined. The characters given the most page time are the farm animals, but despite their heavy personification, their personalities and traits are not distinct. Some behave in species-contradictory ways, as when the geese eat eggs.

The book's dialogue is formulaic, and the illustrations are relied on more heavily than the prose in crafting settings and characters. Within the artwork, colors bleed outside of lines, and proportions are inconsistent. Characters and objects are crushed together, and dimensions are ignored.

In the end, Kath's animals go beyond their apparent abilities to drag the table back down. The family finally grounds the table by placing more books on it. This conclusion has an urban legend feel, revealing that the table is always messy in Kath's house out of necessity; the last time they tried to clean it off, it escaped into the atmosphere.

Conceptually unique, *The Helium Table* is a children's origin story, relying on imaginative worldbuilding to explain an everyday feature of a child's house.

TIA SMITH (January 31, 2019)

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