Clarion Review

Young Adult Fiction

The Illuminated Forest
Edwin Fontanez
Exit Studio
978-0-9831891-6-9
Five Stars (out of Five)

This tender tale of animal friendship conveys the vulnerability of abandoned cats and young teens alike.

Grief stricken and lonely, a young boy adapts to difficult changes thrust upon him and interacts with an abused and abandoned stray cat facing similar pain. In this magical tale, a forest breathes with effervescence, guiding and educating in a mystical realm haunted by the presence of a special maternal entity.

Tender, yet delivered with a punch in all the right places, this perceptive and incredibly empathetic story reveals the depths of despair as the brutal blows of life threaten to snuff out the will to live in Mateo and his feline observer: “It was just a cat, and God knows I’ve seen a lot of them in my life. Still there was something about it that stopped me in my tracks; it was the saddest cat I’ve ever seen. Suddenly I could see myself reflected in its eyes, and there I saw someone scared, lost, and at the end of his rope: a true reflection of myself at that moment.”

For those who wonder what a cat feels when faced with the loss of a loving home that once provided shelter and nurture, this enlightening look at a semi-feral cat personified will bring even the cold-hearted to tears. Portrayed as a rational creature with emotional needs, this animal steals the limelight in heartrending scenes, a commentary on the human tendency toward apathy and, sometimes, cruelty: “Disoriented by the excruciating blow, the stray found itself flying across the yard. Pain burned the side of its ribs. It landed with a thud on the side of its face, still not realizing what had happened. Humiliated and hurt, the cat spat out a mouthful of dirt and snorted out the dust that was lodged inside its nostrils.”

The simplicity of the cat’s thoughts emphasizes the severity of mankind’s abrasive and unpredictable actions with phrases such as “biganimal gone,” “biganimal good,” “biganimal …

no angry," or "stinkanimal." Perhaps the most poignant is "animalfriend," a natural state of being for a sensitive human. Filled with beautiful illustrations to enhance the most striking scenes, this childlike fairytale will also appeal to adults seeking sophisticated symbolism and well-honed language typical of fine literature.

A native of Puerto Rico, Edwin Fontánez is a prolific author of children's books, a producer, and an artist. In 1994, he founded Exit Studio, his own company, to showcase his work. He holds a BFA from the Escuela de Artes Plásticas in San Juan and a second degree in communication design from the Pratt Institute in New York.

The Illuminated Forest exhibits characteristics often found in award-winning juvenile and young adult fiction, making this book an excellent choice for public libraries and classroom use. Animal rights organizations may find this title an entertaining method of instruction for people living in environments overburdened with domesticated pets that have turned unapproachable and wild outdoors.

Julia Ann Charpentier