

The Last Surviving Dinosaur: The TyrantoCrankaTsuris

Steven Joseph

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The Last Surviving Dinosaur is a warm exercise in family lore that highlights the joy of storytelling.

Steven Joseph's picture book *The Last Surviving Dinosaur: The TyrantoCrankaTsuris* is a playful, alternative creation story that draws on Yiddish humor.

Drawing on the concepts of tsuris (problems) and kvetching—defined as “complaining about your tsuris”—this picture book focuses on a Jewish family in New York and their maladies. They use humor to magnify their misery for the goal of one-upmanship. These exchanges will appeal to adults more than children, especially as the relatives' complaints heighten from warts, to the line “Only I could get deer ticks in Brooklyn!”, to a brain tumor. The work echoes anecdotal, stand-up comedy, but behind the tongue-in-cheek tone, there's appealing affection.

The family's lively exchanges inspire the idea of a TyrantoCrankaTsuris, a dinosaur who teaches the family's daughter a lesson. When the TyrantoCrankaTsuris is ridiculed, she launches into a filibustering complaint that drives nearly every other dinosaur to extinction. The TyrantoCrankaTsuris's monologue repeats many of the complaints that the human relatives made. Only a TyrantoKvetchaTsuris is immune to the power of these complaints. The two wed and evolve into humans over millions of years.

Entertaining but exaggerated, this story includes elements that have to be taken with a grain of salt, including around concepts of evolution, and around the fact that TyrantoCrankaTsuris's complaints are disconnected from her prehistoric setting. The message is mixed. In this telling, humans wouldn't exist if the dinosaur hadn't unleashed her feelings, though in doing so, she eliminated many of her own kind.

The cheerful ending implies that tantrums can yield positive results as it pulls attention back to the human father and daughter, who treat the dinosaurs as lessons in understanding that it's normal to complain, though one shouldn't do so too often. It's useful, roundabout advice.

Confined to a picture book format, though, the story-within-a-story technique falters. The first half of the book is nostalgic, contextualizing the concepts but slowing the pace. The TyrantoCrankaTsuris appears midway, after an explanation that the family's “tsuris training” prepared the speaker for fatherhood.

Cartoon illustrations interpret instances of tsuris in a fun way and with an emphasis on grown-up dilemmas, such as a laptop on fire. When it comes to the main dinosaurs, the art does not play off of the Tyrannosaurus as the Tyrano-names suggest it might. The dinosaurs appear friendly, undermining the rich humor that rests in the book's contrast between visual ferocity and verbal frailty.

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KAREN RIGBY (June 12, 2019)

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