Clarion Review

Picture Books

The Legend of Captain McFinn and Friends
Phyllis Cafaro
MADA Design, illustrator
McFinn Press
978-0-9799283-3-8
Five Stars (out of Five)

The undersea world of Sand Dusty Reef comes alive with a lesson for children everywhere in Phyllis Cafaro's splashy new book, *The Legend of Captain McFinn and Friends*. With page after page of flamboyantly colorful illustrations from MADA Design, the book will appeal to young children who enjoy the similarly fantasized ocean environments created by Disney's Pixar and the like.

In this moral tale, Cafaro introduces McFinn as a bully of a shark—"the meanest one of all"—and relates the tale of underwater intimidation that McFinn and his gang, his "bully buddies," use to frighten the "nice little fishies" who share their reef. McFinn picks on even his own friends, sometimes laughing at them "the way bullies do." Parents should note that children will know that McFinn is the "bad guy" here, but the character is not particularly terrifying, either in appearance or in deed.

Meanwhile, the "good guys," a separate group of friendly, non-aggressive creatures, work happily together to fix up and decorate their clubhouse. In a subtle lesson for her readers, Cafaro notes that the bullies are actually jealous of the fun these others have together. When McFinn and friends cause chaos at the clubhouse, an affable octopus asks an oft-heard question, one to which many children will relate: "Why do bullies always have to ruin everything?"

Again, this is a moral tale, so McFinn does learn his lesson. Not only does a mild-mannered character stand up to him, but the entire group of nice little fishies works together to save him when he finds himself in trouble. McFinn realizes the error of his ways: "I was a bully, but you helped me anyway! My own friends didn't." Further, he now understands that "He had never known what it was like to have real friends before!"

With the turnaround in McFinn from bully to friend, Cafaro shows children how the

kindness and understanding of others, even those who are fearful, can make a significant difference in the lives of all concerned. She encourages her readers to be the very best they can be, “to have the courage to make the right choices, even when everyone else is trying to make [them] do the wrong thing.” Her strong message is a timely one, especially now, when the topic of bullying in schools is making headlines in communities everywhere.

In addition to the moral lessons, *The Legend of Captain McFinn and Friends* includes a wonderful page of “Fun Finn Facts” that offers information about a few of the different sea creatures readers encounter in the book. Cafaro relates the facts to her individual characters of each species, helping to explain why the characters look and act as they do in the story. This short, simple page packs solid information into a fun format and serves as a great finish to an entertaining but instructive tale.

Likeable characters, enjoyable storyline, inspiring messages and all, this book will appeal to a range of young children. Its lessons are well worth teaching, and parents and teachers alike may find that McFinn and his adventures provide the perfect opportunity to start discussions about bullying, friendship, and more.

Cheryl M. Hibbard