

The Magical Life of Mr. Renny

Leo Timmers

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This bright and busy book tells the story of Mr. Renny, a painter whose works resemble their subjects so vividly they're indistinguishable from the real thing. Sadly, the economic downturn hits artists where it hurts, and Mr. Renny's stall at the local market is passed over for his friend Rose's bountiful produce stand. One day a stranger appears and makes a strange offer to the painter. If he'd like, with the bite of an apple, he can paint things and have them actually be real. As you might suspect, complications ensue.

This is a lovely book; Leo Timmers's artwork is cleanly rendered but packed with details. As Mr. Renny's newly created wealth fills the pages, kids will love spotting the small details like a single bite taken out of a giant waffle being eaten by the bird he had painted. And the giant licorice. And fruit pastilles. And the pizza sticking out of his suitcase. You get the idea, but it's great fun, and the market scenes are reminiscent of Richard Scarry's *Busy Busy World*, with something to see in every corner.

The Magical Life of Mr. Renny is translated by Bill Nagelkerke, and reads well but for one burning question: Why "Renny"? The book opens with a green apple painted in the style of René Magritte and the sentence "This is not an apple" underneath. The man who charms the painting so Mr. Renny can eat it arrives in a black coat and bowler hat, carrying a black umbrella. While the story exists apart from Magritte's work, it's influenced by it throughout. And the original title was "Meneer René"! It seems odd to disconnect the book from an easy opportunity to educate kids about art, though the relationship between perception and reality is played with to good effect.

The moral, which pits material gain against creativity and friendship, is thoughtfully spelled out here, and that's surely the most important thing. *The Magical Life of Mr. Renny* may flirt with the surreal, but at bottom it's a story with heart and humor, as well as a visual delight.

HEATHER SEGCEL (July 27, 2012)

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