

The Magician's Elephant

Kate DiCamillo

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"We are always happy when people live, ain't we?" says a woman to a young boy who is desperately searching for the elephant he believes will lead him to his long lost sister. The simplicity and relevance of this statement resonates throughout *The Magician's Elephant*, as beggars turn the commonplace into music, blind dogs dream of war, and police officers constantly question: "What if?"

The novel tells the story of Peter, a young boy living in the city of Baltese with Vilna Lutz, an aging soldier whose lucidity lasts just long enough to instruct the boy in the martial ways: honor and the strength to halt tears. The book opens with a fortune teller informing Peter that his sister, who he believed had died the day she was born, has in fact been alive these six years. What's more, an elephant will guide him to her. Unwilling to put hope into such an implausible story, Peter tries to forget the gypsy's words, until he learns of a curious event at the town's opera house: a magician, trying to conjure a bouquet of lilies out of thin air, instead produced an elephant, which landed in the lap of a noblewoman.

The power of DiCamillo's writing enables the hope and determination of the characters to break through the gloom that permeates the story. The weather is dismal in Baltese: "No one could recall a winter so thoroughly, uniformly gray." The situations of the characters seem as bleak as the sunless sky-from Peter's forced diet of "the smallest possible fish" and moldy bread, to the crushed legs of the noblewoman who had the misfortune of acting as the elephant's landing pad. Yet, Peter dreams of beautiful golden wheat fields and truly believes that he will find his sister. A man who falls from a great height and snaps his spine realizes that "life is funny" and laughs for the rest of his lopsided days. The cold gray streets and the lonely apartments that serve as a dreary backdrop make the book's spirit of optimism shine even more brightly.

Although *The Magician's Elephant* is recommended for children ages 8-13, DiCamillo never talks down to her young readers. When a group of policemen gather to discuss what to do with the elephant, one officer suggests they find it a home, to which a fellow officer replies, "Why did I not think of it? Let us dispatch the elephant immediately to the Home for Wayward Elephants Who Engage in Objectionable Pursuits Against Their Will." Middle reader literature rarely includes sarcasm, since authors believe it would be over most kids' heads. Other middle-grade authors might be wary of including the circular, old-fashioned style of dialogue that gives the story the air of an old European village. DiCamillo has enough faith in her readers' ability to include both literary elements as well as a generous helping of large vocabulary words.

Complementing the text are the haunting drawings of Yoko Tanaka, whose gray shadowed sketches seem somber, but not frightening. The illustrations are simultaneously whimsical and ghostly, and emphasize the story's sophistication.

New mystical novels for teens seem to be popping up everywhere, but most are targeting readers in their middle and upper teens. As the *Harry Potter* series progressed, plots of romance and impending adulthood became nearly as relevant as spells. In *The Magician's Elephant*, DiCamillo returns to themes more relevant to a younger audience: how

magic can make a whole community believe in the impossible, and that those who never doubt its existence will be rewarded with the answers to their dreams. Like its contemporary, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, DiCamillo's book uses dark undertones and understated humor, but *The Magician's Elephant* differs in its unwavering positive message.

DiCamillo's work in the young adult field has already been recognized by the literary community; she was awarded the Newberry Medal for *Because of Winn Dixie*, which was adapted for film. With *The Magician's Elephant*, DiCamillo has again captured the loneliness and unwavering optimism that can only be found in children.

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