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The Old Man and the Flea

Mary Elizabeth Hanson
David Webber Merrell, illustrator
Rising Moon (Mar 25, 2001)
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“There were joys in having a pet flea the shop clerk didn’t mention.” When an old man who has lived alone for a long time goes to buy a pet, he decides on a flea. The shop clerk tells him that the flea is house-trained and is a special breed that will not bite him. The clerk does not, however, tell him how much he and the flea will enjoy each other’s company or how inexpensive and convenient it is to have such a very small pet.

Life is perfect for the two of them until the townspeople observe the old man having a great time apparently talking to himself—for they do not see the tiny flea. The people begin to whisper about the old man. They clearly think he is mentally unstable although this is never said outright in the book. This lack of clarity about the old man’s supposed condition might conceivably be confusing to a young child. Could a person really be taken way and put behind locked doors because his “toupee’s too tight” or because there is “a chipmunk in his chimney?”

Fortunately, the issue of institutionalizing people who behave even slightly abnormally is made much lighter by the illustrations. They are visually fun and convey a certain joyful optimism.

Hanson portrays an inspiring picture of friendship and loyalty between the flea and the old man. In the end, after he is rescued by the flea, the old man gets an additional pet that is larger so people can see that he is talking to something. He has learned the lesson that if you are going to do something that is socially unacceptable, or even something that only appears to be socially unacceptable, you had better be clever about it. Happily he does not alter his behavior to the extent that he gets a typical pet such as a dog or a cat. This marvelous old man instead goes for an elephant.

VICKIE LEONARD DARNELL (April 15, 2001)

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