

The Pesky Bird

Marianne Markarian

Margaret Markarian Wasielewski, Illustrator

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Pomegranate Publishing (November 2005)

Hardcover \$16.00 (32pp)

978-0-9767377-0-4

The abundance of mulberries, those delicious purple fruits with which too many American children are unfamiliar, sets this Armenian folktale in a charming peasant world of hard work and its rewards. While waiting for her father to earn passage for her family to join him in America, Mariam helps her mother willingly, but she chafes under the new restrictions that come with her twelfth birthday.

Now required to cover her hair, she is charged not to “bring shame to our family” with immodest behavior. Unfortunately, this means that the tree climbing she cherishes is now forbidden. Respectable young women only pick the mulberries they can reach from the ground.

Mariam obeys her mother, but one day when no one is looking, the temptation of the plump mulberries in the trees' highest branches is irresistible. However, Uncle Ohannes happens along and decides to nap under the very tree that conceals Mariam! Desperate to remain hidden, she impersonates “the pesky bird” of the story’s title and sends her uncle stomping off in frustration.

Set before the 1915 Turkish genocide of the Armenian people, the story avoids all foreshadowing of this terrible event by instead framing Mariam’s story with the promise of immigration to America. This seems a curious choice because the author’s grandmother, the real Mariam, is memorialized in the dedication with the words, “she lived her life with so much joy despite unimaginable suffering.” This wording suggests that the Armenian genocide and its aftermath were central to her life experiences. Omitting any hint of this lessens the empathic connection today’s children might feel, because it allows the story to blend too easily with the enormous treasury of folktales that is already available. Even a simple acknowledgment that the story is based on real life might help it stand out. Without this, readers only notice the gender constraints placed on Mariam without a larger cultural context to give them texture.

Even without such situating, however, the mother-daughter team of author and illustrator successfully preserve nostalgia for a girlhood that is only accessible to today’s children through books. Markarian is now a freelance writer in California, writing frequently about her grandparents’ survival of the genocide. This book won the Best Juvenile Fiction category of the 2003 Santa Barbara Writer’s Conference.

Wasielewski is an award-winning artist whose work has been exhibited in New York, Detroit, Cincinnati, Florida, and Chicago. Here, her stylized pastel drawings render Armenian peasant life charmingly in a palette that embraces the traditional colors and designs of the Ottoman Empire. The recipe for Armenian Lavosh, an unleavened cracker bread, included at the end of the story, allows readers to experience a taste of Armenia while imagining lives such as Mariam’s.

ELIZABETH BREAU (August 18, 2009)

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