The Warlord's Puppeteers

Virginia Walton Pilegard
Nicolas Debon, Illustrator
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Embedded within this adventurous tale of warlords, bandits, and puppeteers is a subtle math lesson on the concept of proportion. Young Chuan and his artist mentor are traveling through the wilderness of Ancient China in the company of a family of puppeteers when they are intercepted by a group of weapon-brandishing bandits. The thieves strip them of their valuables, including the trunk of puppets the family uses to earn their livelihood.

As Chuan tries to make replacements of the family's lost puppets, he learns the importance of proportion in creating realistic models of people, and is taught the ancient Chinese rule, "the ratio of the head to the body must be one to six." This book is the fourth offering in the Warlord series. Two earlier titles were selected for BookSense "76 lists," which note the top selections of independent booksellers across the country. As in the previous books, the author incorporates an important primary math concept into a page-turning adventure story rich in authentic Asian detail. An endnote explains the historical significance of puppetry during the Tang dynasty.

The illustrator, who was born in France and studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, now lives in Toronto. He has previously worked for the French Ministry of Culture's contemporary visual arts department, and illustrated several books, including a biography of the Canadian artist Emily Carr, and *The Martial Arts Book*. For this tale he has created realistic paintings that depict the costume and landscape of the period.

The author has worked as an elementary school teacher, and is currently writing her next Warlord book, as well as a series of children's books about California history. Her Chuan story would work well in a classroom setting as an introduction to Ancient China or puppetry as well as proportion. Elementary-school-aged children will identify with Chuan's curiosity and cleverness, and enjoy his resourcefulness as he uses the fruits and vegetables at hand as his puppet-constructing materials. The truly inspired can take advantage of appended instructions for creating their own puppets. Bold and colorful illustrations lend themselves to large-group reading, enhancing the book's value as a read-aloud.

Although useful as a curriculum tie-in, this volume is an equally enjoyable read simply for the story of Chuan's suspenseful journey back to his warlord. The mathematical theme fits so seamlessly into the plot of the story that it in no way distracts the reader from the main action of Chuan's trial and error in puppet design. Few children will even realize that they are getting an extra math lesson along with the story.

CAROLYN BAILEY (January / February 2004)

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