

Tito, the Firefighter/Tito, el bombero

Tim Hoppey

Kimberly Hoffman, Illustrator

Eida de la Vega, Translator

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In spite of being only eight years old, Tito has a skill that the firefighters on duty don't have. They need his help.

Tito wants to ride in the fire truck with his fireman friend, Richie, but the regulations forbid riders other than firefighters. Then a monolingual Spanish-speaking man phones the fire station and unsuccessfully tries to tell Richie about a ringing smoke detector and smoke in his multifamily dwelling. Since Tito is bilingual, he volunteers to interpret. He feels like a firefighter when Richie asks him to go with them to the apparent fire to help with communication.

The author's nineteen years as a firefighter for the New York City Fire Department provide expertise for this book, as does his use of his work location, East Harlem, for the story's setting. Hoppey also holds a B.A. degree in English and history, and has two volumes of poetry inspired by his firefighting experiences: *Subterranean Angels* and *Where There's Smoke*. *Tito, the Firefighter* is the author's and the illustrator's first children's book.

The illustrator, who works as a graphic designer, has a B.S. degree in design communication. Traveling and temporarily living in three African countries increased her sensitivity to multiculturalism. Her computer-enhanced drawings vividly depict Tito's neighborhood and the fire station. An illustration of the fire truck presents, through the windshield, a close-up view of Richie, in his firefighter's uniform and hat. Tito, in a striped shirt, is sitting beside him. Richie asks, "Which building is it, Tito?" The excited boy points, saying, "¡El rojo!" (The red one!). Tito as narrator describes the firefighter's response: "Richie yelled, 'In English, Tito! In English!'"

The story is told in English with Spanish words scattered throughout. Contextual clues and translations worked into the text help English-speaking readers with the Spanish words. For example, when Tito introduces readers to his Spanish-speaking East Harlem neighborhood, he says, "When my mother sends me to the store for milk and eggs, I ask for *leche y huevos*." A vocabulary glossary follows.

This attention-catching book validates the importance of being bilingual, thus promoting increased self-esteem for Spanish-speaking children. Sprinkling Spanish words into the text aids language learning because readers can't ignore them. Children ages four to eight will enjoy the big red fire truck, and will identify with Tito's excitement about riding in it. Due to the boy's special skill, he achieves his dream of riding in the fire truck and helping the firefighters. The book's most vital lesson is that being bilingual is a great asset.

NORMA D. KELLAM (August 18, 2009)

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