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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ JUVENILE FICTION

Tom T's Hat Rack: A Story about Paying It Forward

Michele Spry
Peggy A. Guest, illustrator
Spry Publishing (Jan 2, 2013)
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In *Tom T's Hat Rack*, Michelle Spry tells the story of Shelby Summers, a fourth-grader with a heart of gold who spends her summer helping her neighbor, a cancer survivor, construct hat racks for the cancer ward. The tale was inspired by a friend of Spry's, Tom Trabue, who was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma but remained upbeat and positive during his treatment.

In this story, Shelby's neighbor, Mr. T, is also a survivor of cancer who retains no trace of bitterness. Rather than feeling sorry for himself, he focuses on how he can improve the experiences of others who have cancer. He solicits Shelby's help, and together they embark upon a project, the end result of which remains a secret to Shelby until its completion. Mr. T's goal is to brighten the cancer ward with racks covered with hats for those undergoing treatment and facing hair loss.

Spry's book is all about "paying it forward." Shelby is in love with life and is always reminding the people around her how important they are to her. Always willing to help, she is a model child.

Herein lies a dilemma of sorts, for Shelby's behavior is so perfect that her character does not seem real. She never complains about anything, never misbehaves, and shows not an iota of reluctance to do as she's told. Even when her friends go on summer vacation and she is left with her neighbors while her parents work, she's thrilled. While Shelby is a great role model for young readers, she is not a typical fourth-grade child. Trying to identify with a character that doesn't seem realistic is one of the challenges of *Tom T's Hat Rack*.

While the quality of the writing here hovers just below average, most of the text is sufficiently easy for a third- or fourth-grade student to understand. If the quality had been better, it is possible that the characters themselves would be more realistic and easier to identify with. It also often feels like Spry is trying too hard to make her point about paying it forward. She writes of Shelby, for example, "She was so excited to be a part of this day and give back to her community." Perhaps phrased differently, the emotion behind such a statement would have more impact and depth.

The book is illustrated by Peggy A. Guest with full-color graphics of various scenes that follow the story line. While the images are sketches rather than realistic representations, they give readers a sense of what the characters look like and bring the tale that much more to life.

One thing Spry does do in *Tom T's Hat Rack* is bravely address a grave topic: how people who are diagnosed with cancer—and those around them—react to the situation. In the case of Mr. T, it's a happily-ever-after ending. Spry's goal is to inspire young readers to pay it forward by being grateful for what they have and to consider how they can help others rather than think only of themselves.

LAUREN KRAMER (June 27, 2013)

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