ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

Virginnie's Hat
Dori Chaconas
Holly Meade, illustrator
Candlewick Press
978-0-7636-2397-5
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Although Virginnie's straw hat is supposed to protect her from the sun, it exposes her to danger when the wind blows it off of her head and into a dark, overgrown swamp. The hat ends up high in the branches of a sycamore tree, and from the moment it lands, Virginnie is determined to get it back. Her fixation on the hat leaves her oblivious to her surroundings. Only the reader notices that "this swamp's alive / With critters that'll chomp and chew."

The swamp creatures that sneak up on Virginnie—crawdaddy craw, snickery snake, and swaying gator—bear names that reflect the folksy rhythmic tone of the narration. Chaconas, who has authored more than a dozen previous picture books, relates Virginnie's adventure in playful rhymes which vary just enough to keep the story humming along. Colorful language evokes the American South: a snake "slunkers," the gator "hightails home," and Virginnie lets out a celebratory "Yee-haw" when she retrieves her hat.

Colorful double-page painted collage illustrations feature bold graphics which will capture the attention of very young readers and play well in group storytimes. Illustrator Holly Meade won a Caldecott Honor for a previous effort in this media, and the high quality of her artwork is apparent in the way the illustrations enhance and extend the narration of Virginnie's experience. A brush of blue paint captures the gusty breeze and falling leaves show her progress as she works to retrieve her hat. In a visual complement to the story, Virginnie's determination is mirrored in the eyes of the swamp critters as they focus on the little girl's toes.

Absorbed in her task, Virginnie never sees the danger that comes and goes as she works. Once she's retrieved her hat, however, she "hears a squishy step!" The reader's "heart's a-floppin" along with Virginnie's as the suspense carries over to the next page where the bushes part and there is… Mama! Preschoolers live to test their boundaries and fears, just like Virginnie, and, like her, they will be happy to be in the arms of a loved one when this suspenseful adventure concludes.