

Water Beds: Sleeping in the Ocean

By Gail Langer Karwoski Illustrated by Connie McLennan

Gail Langer Karwoski

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Bedtime stories are meant to quiet the mind and relax the body and they only enhance the experience when they are also educational. “Sleeping in the Ocean” aims both to provide a transition into dreams as if the child is “floating on gentle waves all night long” (preface) and allow the child to think outside herself and her environment. It is common to see how people as well as those familiar domestic animals one comes in contact with sleep but the question of how sea animals sleep in a world so unlike ours is addressed elegantly in Karwoski and McLennan’s book.

The story begins by addressing a “little person” tucked in a “warm dry bed” who is surrounded by stuffed animals in the shape of sea animals. “Have you ever wondered what it would be like to sleep in the deep deep sea?” the book asks the main character who though called “little person” is drawn as a young boy. Holding a stuffed animal dolphin the boy then follows a path of sleeping sea mammals from various whales (including Orca Humpbacks and Beluga) and seals (including Harbor Elephant and Northern Fur) to other mammals like dolphins manatees walruses and sea otters.

This journey is the basis for a soothing instruction of marine mammal sleep habits delivered in a simplified but accurate manner. And as is usual for Sylvan Dell Books the story is not all; an additional section at the end offers information and activities “For Creative Minds.” Youngsters can learn more about mammal facts and draw and create their own mammal by learning how each part of the body helps them survive.

The illustration is beautiful and rich with movement and color. McLennan confidently uses burnt yellow purples and reds to contrast the myriad of greens and blues traditionally associated with the sea and as a result deepens the images with possibility and imagination. The animals seem to have personalities even with eyes closed and each component of the sea world appears benevolent and safe.

It’s even more unsettling then in the midst of this loving watery world to in each scene see the boy depicted next to the animals as also asleep—but underwater. Since it is impossible for humans to sleep as such the boy often appears dead especially with the walruses where he is suspended in a neck flotation device with his eyes closed. Karwoski and McLennan make the unsignaled leap that the boy is no longer awake and listening to this bedtime story in the rest of the book as he is on page one but especially since in our dreams our dream-self is awake it is even more jarring.

Overlooking the boy’s appearance which does upset some of the soothing calm the story and quality of the illustrations largely achieve in concept and substance it is a smart book that successfully bridges a child’s imagination and growing understanding of the physical world.

CHRISTINE THOMAS (April 30, 2006)

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