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Picture Books

When Elephant Goes to a Party
Sonia Levitin
Jeff Seaver, illustrator
Rising Moon
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Elephants and etiquette are a fresh combination in the world of picture books. This unlikely pairing lends liveliness and interest to Levitin's newest picture book, a descriptive guide to proper party behavior.

A girl receives an invitation to a birthday party and decides to bring along an elephant friend. The story explains the correct way to accomplish this, from calling the hostess to ask permission through the final "thank you's" as the guests leave the party. The instruction in manners is excellent, and touches on some important issues for the Pre-K through First Grade crowd, like this memorable advice: "Elephants cannot take the birthday present home again. It belongs to the birthday person." Asking permission, pleases, and thank-you's are encouraged, as is general gracefulness like wearing the right clothes for the occasion and taking turns at party games.

The dryly comical tone of the writing is appropriately accompanied by light and humorous illustrations which envelop the text. While the words of this story offer helpful suggestions for the elephant guest, the illustrations reveal that she has not quite mastered birthday party etiquette. For example, "Most elephants can sit down gently so the chair won't fall apart," is faced by a full-page illustration of the confused-looking elephant hulking over a broken chair with her arms crossed. This consistent interplay of text and art creates the story of a party guest who is learning her manners along with the reader, though this is never stated explicitly.

This picture book is irresistible to young readers. Elephant's mistakes affirm a child's knowledge of correct behavior, and prevent the instructional aspect of the text from sounding like a simple list of "do's" and "dont's." Entertaining and informative, this book is an excellent choice for reading aloud. Even the "Fun Elephant Facts" on the last page really are!

Carolyn Bailey