

First Opinion: A Fable of Imagination

Kirk, Daniel. *Library Mouse*. New York: Abrams Book for Young Readers, 2007.

A. Waller Hastings

Animal stories have been part of children's literature since almost before there was a children's literature. As Seth Lehrer notes in a recent history of children's books, Aesop's fables were "the core of childhood reading and instruction" from the ancient Greeks until the nineteenth century (35). If today we read animal tales more for entertainment than enlightenment, we can still recognize in the Greek menagerie the literary prototypes of Peter Rabbit and Despereaux Tilling. The intrepid mouse taking a thorn from the paw of a lion is a direct ancestor of the Queen of the Mice, whose subjects rescue the Cowardly Lion from the poppy field, and a collateral relative of brave Matthias of Redwall. Aesop's fox cursing the grapes as sour is perhaps related to the frustrations of Brer Fox.

Talking animals come in all varieties, but most typically they are heavily anthropomorphic; there are more Mickey Mouses than Black Beauties out there. Aesop used talking animals to teach human morals and manners; the clothed, speaking creatures of today's children's books may not seek to teach in the same way, but they nevertheless comment on human society, not animal behavior. While the animal who talks is fairly common, though, the animal who writes is much less common. There are, after all, few Charlotte Cavities in any species, including the human.

Sam, the eponymous hero of Daniel Kirk's *Library Mouse*, has more ambition than Charlotte, apparently. While her work could fairly be called public-relation sloganeering, Sam seeks to write full-length books—books of all sorts. He begins by "writing what he knows"—*Squeak! A Mouse's Life*—and follows with a picture book and a mystery. In the mirrors-within-mirrors world of self-reflexive writing, *Library Mouse* itself fits three categories: it tells about Sam's life, is itself a picture book, and poses a mystery to the librarians whose building he inhabits: who has been writing "Sam's" books? Most of all, though, *Library Mouse* is a fable, using its cute mouse hero to teach children about the power of their own imagination—for Sam's great accomplishment is not the books he writes, but those he inspires the library's children to write. His goal is not to be Charlotte, but to increase the Charlottes in the human population.

As we learn right away, Sam lives beneath the children's reference section, coming out at night when patrons and librarians have all gone home. An avid reader, he seemingly read every book on the shelves before deciding to write his own. Discovered by a child patron, the book proves to be very popular, as are its two sequels—so much so that the librarians invite the mysterious author to come meet his fans.

Sam's most mouselike quality is his timidity, though, so he balks at making actual contact; instead, he creates a display to bring out the children's own creativity. Soon the library is full of new, self-"published" works, Sam returns to his own writing, and the story becomes a fable of human imagination—a lineal descendant of Aesop.

Works Cited

Lehrer, Seth. *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008. Print.

About the Author

A. Waller Hastings is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Library and Information Science at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, where he teaches children's and young adult literature.

Second Reaction: The Storytelling Aspects of *Library Mouse*

Kirk, Daniel. *Library Mouse*. New York: Abrams Book for Young Readers, 2007.

Nadezda Pimenova

The plot of the imaginative story *Library Mouse* by Daniel Kirk is simple. Sam, a smart but shy mouse, lives in a library. He writes and illustrates his own stories and then puts them on the library bookshelves. When children and librarians find these tiny books, they all want to meet the author. What should Sam do?

I used *Library Mouse* in one of my classes with Purdue students majoring in elementary education. We talked about enhancing language in early elementary grades. One group of students read the book and sequenced the plot. They then retold the story for the rest of the class, after which peers evaluated their storytelling skills.

My students did a good job—their use of the picture walk technique helped establish student interest in the plot and set up positive expectations about what was to come with Sam, the library mouse. I hoped to show Purdue students that storytelling is a critical tool in encouraging children’s love of reading. Storytelling literacy also allows students to compare, describe, and solve problems. Stories can have power and become a form of social action. This is what happened for my students. The message they found in *Library Mouse* was that everyone could be a writer and everyone should have opportunities to share their stories, though the idea might be surprising at first: “Me?—An author?”

One of the Purdue students was so excited about the book that she volunteered to read it to first- and third-grade elementary students in a local school. In her literacy journal, she wrote how much the elementary students enjoyed the book. Children’s comments included, “I like pictures,” “It is a good book”. They liked the way Sam used his imagination and how he dressed up while writing. They also liked that children were writing their own books. When reading to first graders, the Purdue student needed to explain some words like “bibliography” and encouraged students to make predictions. She also noticed that the youngsters enjoyed the pictures and paid attention to Sam’s costumes. They liked seeing the “Meet the Author” mirror and understand the author’s message that children at any age could be writers if they tried.

Moreover, the teachers got interested in the book and wanted to share it in the future. The third-grade teacher thought it might be a good idea to put up a “Meet the Author” mirror in class. The Purdue student was sure that this story came at a perfect time for the first graders because they had been discussing the importance of ideas in writing and would begin writing their own stories the following week. This book helped them gain enthusiasm about writing.

Library Mouse is a good encouragement for beginning writers. It can bring the excitement of writing to an elementary class.

About the Author

Nadezda Pimenova is a PhD student and teaching assistant in the Curriculum and Instruction Department at Purdue. Her research interest is foreign language acquisition.