

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Children's Voices

Dave Eggers Illustrates Stories by Elementary Schoolers

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Children's Books

By **MARIA RUSSO**

When last spring Dave Eggers visited a new public charter elementary school in an especially devastated section of Detroit, he was struck by “something extraordinary” going on. As he writes in a note that prefaces a new collection of stories written by the children in the school’s writing club and published with help from 826michigan, part of Eggers’s writing-centered nonprofit 826 National, the mood was “joyful, quirky, rigorous, familial.” Turn to the back of the book and another note tells you a bit more about the school: The Boggs School focuses on “community building as the highest form of education,” and it “follows a place-based model,” in which all the children’s learning is “rooted in the local.”

Surely going to a school with such an excellent pedagogical grounding, run by adults with the courage to put into action such subtly subversive ideas about what matters in educating the next generation, contributes to the high-flying imaginations the children show in these 12 stories. There is the delightful “Once Upon a Time,” by Na’Kyah Adjuman and Kaden Hamilton, which tells of “a black princess named Patience.” She is given a pet shark, Jerry, by her fairy godmother. Patience trains him, and at first all is well and they frolic together in her pool. Soon, though, Jerry starts behaving badly. Patience goes back to the fairy godmother, who promptly punches Jerry in the

face. Patience then decides to consult her magic marble, which tells her that “Jerry had not been trained enough.” So she returns to training him, and it works! “Jerry got better and Patience was finally happy.” Our young authors leave us with a moral: “If you do the right thing, good things will happen to you.”

Many of the stories display the wonderfully frank approach to physical life so often squashed by squeamish adult censorship. “Trip to Atlanta,” by Riley Jackson, tells about a long drive down South, culminating in the declaration, once she was there with her relatives, that the author “was feeling so proud that my dad drove all the way from Detroit to Atlanta without going to the bathroom.” On the next page, she even reiterates her feeling: “That is why I am proud.” And in “When I Went to the Zoo,” by Yusef Muhammad, the author uses his powers of observation to note, about the zebras: “They were all grown-ups. They smelled weird.”

It’s also fantastic that Eggers (along with the Boggs School’s teachers, of course) recognized the brilliance that can lie in a child’s minimalism. He, and they, seem to possess the endangered pedagogical art of knowing when it is appropriate to leave a child’s work alone and appreciate it for what it is. (There is a mantra in Montessori education that comes to mind: Don’t *correct*. Teach.) Several stories are extremely short — in the four-sentence range — and yet contain multitudes in what’s left unstated. The book’s title comes from a brief but resonant story by Maya Wheeler called “The Mystery Music.” Here it is in its entirety: “Jake and Amy heard some music. They didn’t know where it was coming from. WHERE IS IT COMING FROM? The end.”

Because Eggers has always wanted to illustrate a book, he writes, he “took a stab at illustrating these stories myself.” He did all his work in what looks to be black marker, in a style that would have to be called “naïve,” with lots of scribbled-in areas and wavery lines. In a few places he nicely captures the emotions behind facial expressions with a few quick strokes — the pride legible in Riley’s features when she stares up at her dad, he of the iron bladder, or the toothy excitement of a girl who is going to be taking a trip to Niagara Falls. Some of the illustrations feature the kind of extra detail professional

illustrators use to bring a story to life visually, such as a charming drawing of a top-hatted man who lives in a rocket ship, to which Eggers has added a mailbox outside the rocket. But there's not all that many of those touches on display here, and given his noble intentions I hope I can be forgiven for wondering why Eggers didn't take the opportunity to enlist an art director to help him refine several sketches that just aren't that pleasing to look at (just as the Boggs School children have teachers who have taught them the mechanics of grammar). That said, everyone involved deserves to have their work shared and enjoyed and admired, and I hope this happy little book finds a wider audience.

WHERE IS IT COMING FROM?

Stories Written by the Students of the Boggs School, Detroit

Illustrated by Dave Eggers

86 pp. 826michigan. \$17.99. (Picture book; ages 4 to 8)