Set against the backdrop of World War II, John Rocco's *Moonpowder* tells the story of young Eli Treebuckle and his out-of-this-world mission to banish his nightmares. Eli is his mother's little Mr. Fix-It and interim man of the house while his father is away at war. He enjoys taking apart appliances, including his family's radio and vacuum cleaner, to get them back into tip-top shape. Despite his best efforts, Eli finds that tinkering with household gadgets cannot fix his biggest problem—a recurring nightmare that haunts his sleep. However, late one restless night, he is visited by the convivial Mr. Moon, who tells him that his nightmares are the result of not enough “moonpowder,” a magical substance “that helps everyone have sweet dreams” (15). Together, Mr. Moon and Eli travel to the Moonpowder factory to save the world from an eternity of nightmares. After inspecting “every inch of the factory” (24), Eli ultimately confronts his nightmare; he saves the day by falling into a deep slumber and enjoying a very sweet dream. Eventually he wakes just in time to celebrate his father’s safe return home and contentedly realizes that his problems have fixed themselves.

Rocco, who, according to his website, has a background as an art director in film and TV, credits Jules Verne, Maxfield Parrish, and Winsor McCay for the inspiration of the book. Framing Eli’s fantasy with dreamlike illustrations of flying machines, gizmos, and cloudscapes, Rocco applies rich, dark, sepia-tinted colors and rounded, soft edges to create an ethereal, mysterious ambiance. Utilizing paneled illustrations similar to those found in graphic novels, his imagery emulates the work of picture book illustrators such as David Wiesner. *Moonpowder* is, therefore, much like an animated film, compellingly driven by its visually engrossing images. While Rocco's lush illustrations will certainly capture readers of all ages, the 48-page primarily pictorial narrative seems quite inviting for early elementary school children.

In addition, Rocco's dedication of the book “to the children of soldiers everywhere” (6) opens the story to a child's point of view on war and alludes to the current state of affairs in the US. While young children may not catch the reference to World War II, as it is not clearly stated but implied through the illustrations, they are likely to enjoy Eli's adventure and readily identify with him, seeing in Eli their own insecurities and heartfelt longing for an absent parent. Rocco's nostalgic glimpse of the 1940s spans the bridge between family circumstances then and now; however, his depiction of Eli's mother as an apron-wearing
shadow relegated to the kitchen is disappointing to those desiring more active images of motherhood. As an undefined character portrayed in one pale, ghostly glimpse and two hazy silhouettes, she functions as nothing more than a cipher. Despite this drawback, Eli’s story convincingly evokes the apprehension and anxiety modern children experience when facing uncertain circumstances and encourages them to be inventive, brave, and adventurous. Overall, Moonpowder offers a sentimental and fantastical exploration of childhood fears, calming and reassuring the anxious child with the knowledge that “Some things just fix themselves” (44).

Work Cited:


About the Author:

Elizabeth Talafuse is a PhD student at Texas A&M University. Her area of specialization is children’s literature, with particular emphasis on fantasy and gender.
Second Reaction: A Tale for Ages Four and Up


Shauna Bigham

*Moonpowder*, by John Rocco, is built around a boy’s dream fantasy. The protagonist, Eli Treebuckle, the “fixer of all things fixable” (Rocco) is about seven. He lives with his mother; his father is a pilot who is away, fighting in a war. Although Rocco doesn’t say which war this is, Eli’s mother’s dress and home decorations suggest WWII. Eli is haunted by the same nightmare each evening, so he decides never to go to sleep again. Mr. Moon comes to Eli’s room, where Eli is busy with his inventions, and asks Eli to fix the dream machine that gives everyone good dreams. Since moonpowder is needed to prime the machine, Eli and Mr. Moon attempt to retrieve some the substance. Although they cannot find the powder, Eli is so tired from his adventures with Mr. Moon that he falls asleep and has a good dream, which, in turn, provides the moonpowder to restart the machine.

The book jacket recommends this book for ages four and up. I read this book several times with my four-year-old son. It was the first book I had shared with him that required him to read the art panels, as the illustrations offer important information not provided in the text. The illustrations are rich and detailed. My son was mostly concerned with the moon’s appearance and if the moon could really talk. For him, this was a straightforward story, with some pretend. It was real.

I wondered how an older, more experienced reader would understand the book, so I shared it with my nine-year-old daughter. She understood the story to be a dream vision and could pinpoint when Eli fell asleep, not by the text, but by reading the illustrative panels. She enjoyed Eli’s aviator goggles worn throughout the book—even to bed—and appreciated that he could buy them for only forty-nine cents. I thought the cost of the goggles to tell her that this story occurred a long time ago, but she read the ad for aviator goggles as a good deal, not as a sign that this happened in the 1940s. She thought perhaps the story was more recent because the dedication is to “the children of soldiers everywhere” and she felt Eli’s room looked pretty normal. Her interest was in the gizbots: small robotic characters that resemble R2-D2 from *Star Wars*. The gizbots ran the factory and were busy with wrenches, dials, levers, and clipboards. Surely they would have noticed that the dream tank’s gauge read empty before they sent for Eli.

Rocco concludes his story satisfactorily for children ages four and up. When Eli’s father returns and comments, “I hear you have been fixing everything around here lately,” Eli responds, “Not *everything* . . . Some things just fix themselves” (Rocco). Eli’s comments
work for both the four-year-old reader who believes everything is possible as well as for the more sophisticated reader who understands the story says more than it at first seems to.

About the Author

Shauna Bigham earned her PhD from Purdue University in 2001. She resides in rural northeast Arizona where she taught alternative K-5 for three years. She is currently an adjunct professor with the local community college.