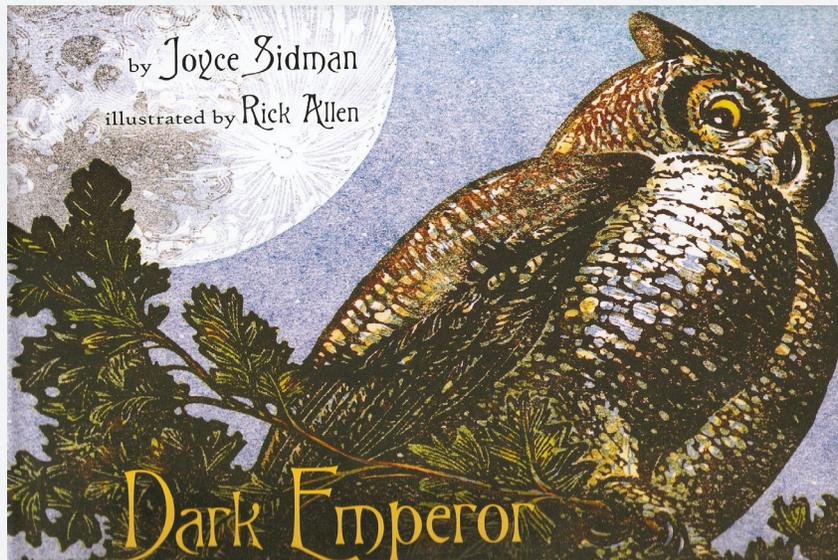


First Opinion: An Efty Tome

Sidman, Joyce. Illus. Rick Allen. *Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

Larry Miller



Many things happen at night when people usually aren't around. *Dark Emperor & Other Poems of the Night* is a fun book that extends an invitation to explore this unseen world outside our doors. Starting with the poem "Welcome to the Night" (6), which lets us know with its words and meter there's a lot that goes on at night. The illustrations on the pages facing the poem are all beautiful and full of so much nighttime activity that they spill out of their frame. Characters from other parts of the book appear in them. Along with the illustration, there's a prose explanation of the natural history to help you understand all the activity in the particular poem and illustration. On the page with the poem, there is a smaller illustration that depicts a detail from the scene set by the poem or the prose.

Every turn of the page introduces a new character. Some, one thinks of as creatures of the night. Some, like the oak tree, are a surprise. The poems are written from several points of view. Most of them are from the character's point of view. The rest are written from the point of view of an observer, and, in the case of the Dark Emperor—the great horned owl—that observer is a potential victim. Dark Emperor's pages and a few others

do introduce some suspense that is not resolved in the book. Will the spider catch one of the previously introduced moths in its web?

There is a lot packed into these 32 pages. If you're wondering how a 32-page book can be an efty tome, there's a character who appears in every small illustration beside each poem and in most of the other illustrations, too. The red eft ends up being the star of the illustrations, if not of the whole book. I've read the book several times, and I'm still finding things I hadn't noticed before, such as the near omnipresence of the red eft.

The formatting of many of the poems helps set a rhythm and tone that fits the subject. I particularly enjoyed the "Cricket Speaks" (20) formatting, which encourages you to finish reading it speaking with the rhythm of a cricket yourself. The poem "Dark Emperor" (12) is formatted in the shape of a great horned owl. This all seems appropriate for a book about things we have difficulty seeing with our diurnal human eyes.

The poem and prose about the snail impart a lot of understanding of how nature works. One learns why snails come out at night, how they eat and make their shells, and why they leave a trail of slime. Of course, the red eft is there demonstrating the sticky sliminess and how it can affect a small creature. The "Love Poem of the Primrose Moth" (10) doesn't come right out and say it, but it does a nice job of planting the idea that if something unusual happens, like a flower blooming at night, there's a reason for it. Another poem I particularly liked was the one on the baby porcupine (18). Some might object to calling it a baby porcupette when porcupette already has baby as part of its meaning, but the author only uses that name in the poem, not in the prose, and it aids the meter and tone of the poem. The presence of the red eft in the illustration of the baby's defense posture as a threat much tinier than the baby is cute.

Although the book is entitled for the owl, the other nocturnal creatures who appear throughout the book play an equal role in illuminating nature's nighttime activities.



A baby emperor stares down from his nest. (Photo courtesy of Larry Miller.)

About the Author

Larry Miller is a retired scientist and businessman and is an avid student and photographer of nature. He has four grandchildren who love books and reading.