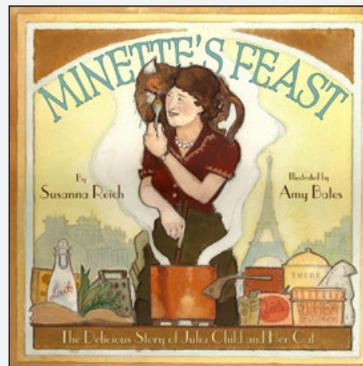


Second Reaction: Gourmet Prose for Preschoolers

Reich, Susanna. *Minette's Feast: The Delicious Story of Julia Child and Her Cat*. Illus. Amy Bates. New York: Abrams, 2012.

Paula Leverage



Minette's Feast is a beautifully illustrated story featuring the gastronomic adventures of the famous American cordon bleu chef Julia Child and her *poussiquette*, Minette Mimosa McWilliams Child. While initially one might question the relevance of the Julia Child story to the preschool group, this book, with its delightful feline protagonist and delicious mouthfuls of rich prose for reading aloud, creates a lovely experience for children and adults. In the "Notes" at the end of the book, the author avows that none of the dialogue in the book has been invented, but that every word echoes the conversations, both oral and written, of Julia and Paul Child as found in Julia's *My Life in France* and their letters.

I read *Minette's Feast* with four-year-olds and especially, repeatedly, with my four-year-old son, Finnan. Reading aloud, it is possible to imagine the rich prose dripping with butter and the saturated fats of roasted meats. From the very opening words of the book, namely, "Minette Mimosa McWilliams Child" which instantly engages the young reader with alliteration (leading to requests for repetition on subsequent readings, "What was the cat's name?") to the lists of mostly unfamiliar, but intriguing, rhyming French vocabulary ("the delicious smells of mayonnaise, hollandaise, cassoulets, cheese soufflés, and duck pâtés"), the book lends itself perfectly to reading aloud, and glossing liberally. Note that the author provides a glossary and pronunciation guide at the end of the book for the non-francophone.

The rhythmic, quasi-musical qualities of the prose which take advantage of the French language, extend also to the more straightforward English prose: for example, "She baked and

blanched, blended and boiled, drained and dried, dusted and fried" (unpaged). Throughout the book, sounds the refrain "Still, there was mouse" in pleasing counterpoint to the rarified dishes prepared by Julia. The climax of this verbal feast occurs when Minette is offered the leftovers of one of Julia's best roasts. A two-page spread image of the ecstatically playful cat creates an almost cartoon-like sequence, while the alliterative, rhythmic prose sketches the cat's antics aurally: "She frisked and flounced, darted and batted. She tiptoed and hopped, danced and pranced" (unpaged).

As if such linguistic gourmandise was not sufficient, the author includes snippets of French, from phrases ("Ooh-la-la! Magnifique!" and "Bon appétit, Minette!"), to proper names (Sainte-Clotilde, Le Cordon Bleu), to French 101 (le boucher, le boulanger, la crémère), to an entire sentence ("Une maison sans chat, c'est la vie sans soleil."). While such resonant language is, to requisition a phrase from the book, "butter to a young child's bread," it additionally affords the reading adult a very natural opening to introducing the child to the concept of a world language and to the language itself.

While *Minette's Feast* is a wonderful children's book full of joie de vivre and entirely appropriate themes for children, I would add in conclusion that it could be said that this is a somewhat frivolous introduction to different countries and cultures. This observation is, interestingly enough, provoked by the book itself. The book's title suggests to an adult reading audience Isak Dinesen's (pseudonym for Karen Blixen) short story "Babette's Feast" (1950), popularized by Gabriel Axel's award winning film of the same name (1987). "Babette's Feast" is a story about the transformative powers of a feast, prepared by a refugee through her self-sacrifice, to reunite a family and, indeed, a community. While *Minette's Feast* shares "Babette's Feast's" interest in the sensuality of food, it does not engage reflection on more profound issues. However, I would argue that introducing young children to world cultures by developing an interest in the lucid qualities of language sets the stage for an awareness of, and love for, other cultures, which can only transmute in later years to more acute social awareness.

About the Author

Paula Leverage is an associate professor and Chair of French in the School of Languages and Cultures at Purdue University. She lives in West Lafayette with her husband, Paul, and three young sons, William, Isidore, and Finnan.