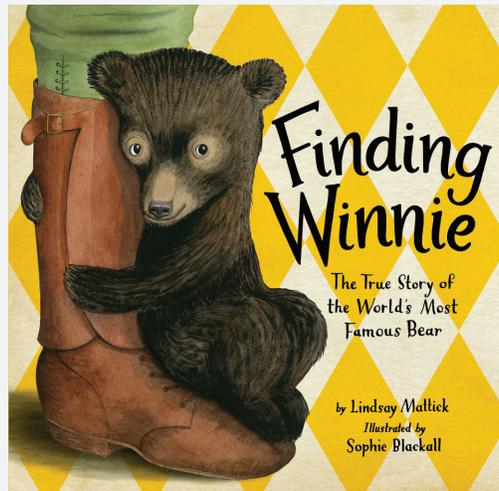


First Opinion: *Finding Winnie*: Stories within a Story

Mattick, Lindsay. *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear*. Illustrated by Sophie Blackall, Little, Brown, 2015.

Marjorie A. Sprunger



Author Lindsay Mattick intricately layers several stories within *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear*. The book begins in first person as an oral bedtime story for Mattick's son, Cole. The mother and son conversation is the overall foundation for the other stories within, which are told as narration. The bedtime story begins with the phrase, "A very long time ago" (Mattick unpagged), which suggests that the story is true. There are tidbits of conversation identified with italics between mother and child throughout the book that add depth to the story. The conversation during the oral storytelling is signaled by black and white cameo sketches of a mother and son lying in bed. This technique of using black and white illustrations to transcend time is executed seamlessly as transitions between the storyline and mother–son conversation. The illustrator, Caldecott award–winning Sophie Blackall, uses watercolors for the layering of stories within a story.

The first story is about Captain Harry Colebourn, a veterinarian from Winnipeg, Canada who is called to serve in World War I. After many long hours on an eastbound train, Harry gets off to stretch his legs and notices a man on the train platform with a baby bear cub. Harry realizes that the trapper has the baby because she has lost her mother.

As the mother tells the oral story, Cole interrupts and asks questions that are tactfully answered. For example:

“What do trappers do?” asked Cole.

“It’s what trappers don’t do. They don’t raise bears.”

“Raise them?”

“You know,” I said. “Love them” (Mattick unpagged).

Harry is faced with a dilemma: he wrestles with whether or not to buy the bear. Repetitive phrases are used throughout the oral storytelling by the author to help carry the meaning for young children. For example, “There is something special about that Bear.” He thinks, “I shouldn’t.” Then, “I can’t” (Mattick unpagged). Blackall also captures Harry’s struggle in a series of panes that reflect his thinking. But finally, he lets “his heart make up his mind” (Mattick unpagged), and he gives the trapper twenty dollars. This first act of kindness shows far-reaching effects that ultimately touch many lives.

As the story unfolds, the colonel on the train cannot imagine what Harry was thinking bringing a bear cub on a train. However, the cub wins him over by standing upright as if saluting him. The colonel responds, “Oh, hallo” (Mattick unpagged).

Harry decides to name the cub after his hometown of Winnipeg, Canada and calls her “Winnie.” The men of Harry’s regiment embrace Winnie. They bring her food and the colonel decides that she is a “Remarkable Bear.” “When Harry thought about Winnie and the voyage across the ocean, his head said, ‘I shouldn’t.’ His head said, ‘I can’t.’ But his heart made up his mind” (Mattick unpagged). This reflects the second act of kindness as it embraces the entire regiment.

Blackall uses strong colors of red and black to depict the thirty ships sailing across the ocean, which are filled with horses and men heading to the front. These colors foreshadow the danger of preparing for battle and then war. However, it is tastefully illustrated so as not to frighten young readers.

In England, when the regiment trained in rainy weather, Winnie would stay in Harry’s tent and practice going up and down the tent pole. She was growing bigger, almost bringing the whole tent down by bending the pole. When the regiment is shipping out for the front, Harry uses his heart to make up his mind again—he takes Winnie to the London Zoo. This is the third act of kindness portrayed and is conveyed through these words:

“There is something you must always remember,” Harry said. “It’s the most important thing, really. Even if we’re apart, I’ll always love you. You’ll always be my Bear” (Mattick unpagged).

This ends the story of Harry and Winnie. Blackall depicts the enormity of the London Zoo with a bird’s-eye view of the landscape. The watercolors used are muted greens and browns, which reflect the time period before World War I.

The second story begins with “Once upon a time” (Mattick unpagged), and it introduces a boy who cannot decide on a name for his stuffed bear. One day his father takes him to the London Zoo, where he meets Winnie. The bear and the boy become good friends. The boy is

allowed to go into the enclosure and play with Winnie. (Students will wonder how this is possible in today's world.) The boy decides to name his stuffed bear after Winnie in the London Zoo, but he adds a little to the name for his bear and calls him Winnie-the-Pooh. The boy's name was Christopher Robin.

Christopher Robin took his stuffed bear, Winnie-the-Pooh, on all kinds of adventures in the woods behind their house. His father, A. A. Milne, wrote stories about the two of them. These stories became well-loved because of the special bond and lessons that Christopher learned with Winnie-the-Pooh. The kind and caring acts in the *Winnie-the-Pooh* series have touched children's lives worldwide. This was how Harry Colebourn's bear, Winnie, became famous.

"When Harry visited Winnie at the zoo, he saw how happy she was. She was being raised. She was truly *loved*. And that was all he had ever wanted, from the moment they met at the train station in White River" (Mattick unpagged). This final act of kindness for Winnie concludes her story: she went from orphan cub to famous bear.

The last part of the book ties the three stories together. Mattick, the author, explains to her son, Cole, that Captain Harry Colebourn was her great-grandfather. Blackall depicts the generations in a family tree that shows direct descendants from Harry to Cole. The ribbon that binds the stories is the "ALBUM," which depicts historical artifacts from Harry Colebourn to Christopher Robin playing with Winnie in the London Zoo to Lindsay playing with her son, Cole. These documents solidify the claim in the subtitle: this is the true story of the world's most famous bear.

Blackall uses her skills throughout this book to add meaning through her rendition of the text. The connections are masterful and so endearing that she has been honored as this year's Caldecott award-winner. This award is given yearly to the illustrator of the most distinguished American picture book. *Finding Winnie* is a masterpiece that will continue to touch children and adults with kindness for many years to come.

About the Author

Marjorie A. Sprunger has been an educator coaching colleagues and teaching first and fifth graders for thirty-five years in Lafayette, Indiana. She has a Bachelor of Arts in elementary education and a Master of Science in education with an endorsement in reading, K-12, from Purdue University. Sprunger is currently teaching an early literacy class and supervising a Theory into Practice (TIP) experience for preservice education majors at Purdue. She enjoys living her faith, spending time with her friends, and going on loving adventures with her husband, kids, and three grandchildren.