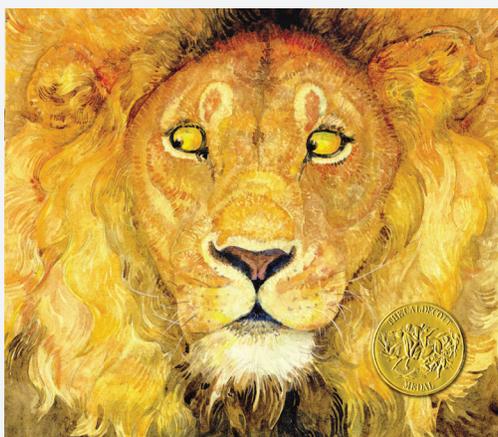


**First Opinion: *The Lion & the Mouse*:
Powerful (Nearly) Wordless Storytelling**

Pinkney, Jerry. *The Lion & the Mouse*.
Little, Brown Books for Young Children, 2009.

Clare Withers



In the 2010 Caldecott Medal–winning *The Lion & The Mouse*, Jerry Pinkney transforms a well-known fable into a luminous story so rich in detail and nuance that it holds up to countless readings. Fable—the world where animals speak, take on human characteristics, and solve problems—is reborn in nearly wordless format. In this tour de force retelling, Pinkney embraces all of the components of the picture book genre, innovates, and fashions a captivating narrative about power, compassion, and community.

The story unfolds easily in lush watercolor. The expressiveness of lion and mouse carry both the bold and the quiet moments. Pinkney alternates borderless full-page or double-page spreads with insets. The African Savanna is created from a palette heavy with yellows and golds, making the sun-washed setting tantamount to another character. This, plus the inclusion of families, expands the storyline and raises the stakes. The actions of the mighty and the small are tied to the maintenance of their shared community.

The mouse first escapes from an owl but then inadvertently rouses the lion and is captured. The consecutive double-page spreads are powerful, with the lion dominating the space, juxtaposed against the tiny mouse. Freed by the lion, the next page features an inset of the mouse—his tail breaking the frame—returning to the squeaks of his considerable family. On the opposite page, the lion—resplendent—pads along, his lioness and cubs in the background.

Having established the majestic beauty of this fragile ecosystem, the action ratchets up again when poachers appear, a padlocked cage at the ready, and lay the trap.

Suspense is heightened by the use of an aerial vantage as the mighty beast approaches the net. In the treetops, all is still as birds roost and a baboon hunches. The inset of one huge paw hitting the trip line is a compelling page-turner. Birds take flight as the ensnared lion roars across several pages. The mouse, hearing the sound, springs into action and saves the day, his actions depicted in two different four-panel series. These insets bring the reader up close to the heroics. After a satisfying rescue, the mouse salvages a hunk of knotted rope and lugs it back to his nest, where his young mice surround it.

To employ the book in the classroom or library is to court imagination and thoughtful articulation. While it can be used in discussions of Africa and ecosystems, Pinkney has provided much more. In addition to the inside pages, the dust jacket, endpapers, and hardcover all extend the story. This playfulness is Pinkney at his best, utilizing every bit to its best effect and letting the reader in on the experience. For example, the lion's face fills the front dust jacket, his eyes riveted to his right. This invitation to flip over the book to view the back dust jacket rewards the reader with a detailed look at the ponderous mouse in profile. The endpapers, though situated outside of the story, inform the tale. A beautiful panorama of the Serengeti is replete with collectives of giraffe, zebra, ostrich, elephant, and more. The soaring birds and the roaring lion are the only active elements. The final set of endpapers offers a delightful scene of the pride and the mouse family, with the latter atop the lion's broad back. Remove the dust jacket and uncover more surprises, including a sly homage to Edward Hicks's *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

The myriad illustration details enable multiple readings and retellings. This is a book to pore over, turn over, hold at arm's length, and hug tight for a better look. It is a story to drink in, to tell, and to consider quietly, a fable as relevant today as when originally popularized by Aesop.

About the Author

Clare Withers is the Children's Literature and Psychology Liaison Librarian at the University of Pittsburgh. A children's librarian for over a decade, she provided storytimes, puppet shows, and other programs for children before moving into academic librarianship. She has taught a graduate course on library resources and service for children and works closely with researchers and children's literature enthusiasts, often making use of primary sources from the Elizabeth Nesbitt children's literature special collection.