First Opinion: Little Owl’s Journey of Self-Discovery


*Carolyn Hunt*

*Owl Sees Owl* is a charming reverso poem about a little owl who leaves the nest to explore the moonlit countryside. Each page has four or fewer words describing this simple yet meaningful journey. The poem begins “Home / Mama / Brother / Sister,” and the illustrations show the family in their nest within the hollow of a tree, all cozily sleeping except for little owl, who is looking out into the night sky with curiosity (Godwin unpaged). The poem continues, “Tree / Nest / Hop / Look / Jump / Flutter / Flap / Fly” as the little owl flies away from the nest, soaring over the treetops, across the starry sky, and swooping over farmland (Godwin unpaged). At the center of the story, little owl lands on a fallen branch over a pond and discovers a reflection glimmering on the surface. The poem reads “Owl / Sees Owl.” Then, when the little owl begins the flight home, the words are the same except presented in reverse. The poem ends with the little owl safely snuggling back in the nest, “Look / Hop / Nest / Tree / Sister / Brother / Mama / Home” (Godwin unpaged).

The illustrations by Rob Dunlavey are beautifully rendered in watercolor, colored pencil, ink, collage, and digital media. The rich hues of blue, green, orange, brown, and silvery gray evoke the feeling of a chilly autumn night. The content of the illustrations—featuring homey farmhouses, pumpkin patches, and friendly scampering mice—create a sense of familiarity and safety. Little Owl is setting off on an adventure but is safe and close to home.
Young children will surely delight in this tale of blossoming independence, self-discovery, and family. The story is highly developmentally appropriate for preschoolers and primary school–aged children, so it is an excellent text choice for encouraging personal connections and text discussions. It would work well for a read-aloud as it could be read multiple times, giving children the chance to discover the reverso structure of the poem and illustrations on their own.

The story may also provide a space for children and teachers to consider issues of gender identities and diversity. As I read descriptions and reviews of Owl Sees Owl, I noticed that Little Owl was often described using male pronouns (he, him, his). For example, a review appearing in the School Library Journal read, “A young owlet leaves his nest one night for a solo adventure—and, by the light of the moon, sees his reflection in the water.” A description of the book on “Goodreads” stated, “This story follows a baby owl one night as he leaves the safety of his nest.” Yet, there is no indication of gender in the text or book-lining commentary. I also noticed that I was using male pronouns as I began to write this review. I wondered if Little Owl was intended to be a boy, or if reviewers, myself included, were applying dominant ideas about gender based on previous experiences with children's literature, which has a preponderance of male characters (Gooden and Gooden).

To satisfy my curiosity, I reached out to the author, Laura Godwin, who explained, “In my mind, Owl is a girl. But I didn’t specify a gender because I wanted a reader to feel free to imagine the character in their own image.” Godwin’s choice promotes inclusivity because it gives all children an opportunity to identify with the main character and to personally connect with the story. To this end, teachers may want to be cognizant of their pronoun choices as they read aloud and discuss the book. It would also be interesting to notice if and how children assign gender identity to Little Owl and to engage in discussions about gender representation within this book and other favorites.

Works Cited


About the Author

Carolyn Hunt is an assistant professor at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Her scholarship and teaching are focused on literacy instructional methods, teacher education, professional learning, and issues of social class. Reading great children’s literature with people of all ages is one of the great joys of her life.