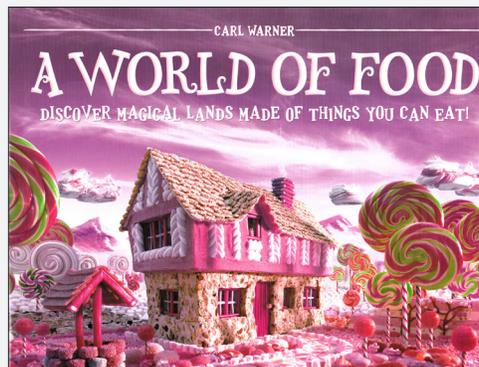


First Opinion: Bringing Wonder to the World through *A World of Food*

Warner, Carl. *A World of Food*. New York: Abrams, 2012.

Tim Myers



A child's capacity to feel wonder is, of course, a precious thing, and it has far more potential power in the world than some may realize. That's why I value books like Carl Warner's *A World of Food*, books that almost seem like actual windows on fantastic worlds beyond our own. But Warner's picture book offers more since young readers are likely to pour over the individual food items that make up its surreal and compelling landscapes, thus exercising their own observational powers. I recommend it.

The basic format is simple, though the results certainly are not. Warner assembles an entire landscape out of different kinds of food, most of it in a single color or shades of that color, and then photographs the scene. There are twelve such landscapes in *A World of Food*, but the result is nothing like the faces Renaissance artist Guiseppe Arcimboldo fashioned out of vegetables, mammals, sealife, and other objects; those have always struck me as clever but unsettling. Warner's landscapes, by contrast, are life-like, pleasant, and welcoming; there's a hint of the oddly whimsical, but nothing off-putting. I think this will make a positive difference in the book's reception with children, as will, of course, the simple but unavoidable "How does he do it?" reaction.

In fact, some of the landscapes are, to me at least, quite evocative, and that's where the potential for wonder comes in. He's especially good, I think, in how he presents light. His sunny farm valley under fleecy clouds makes me want to wander there; the view from a bedroom window of a streetlamp and fallen leaves is both mysterious and cozy. I long to hike in his half-shaded broccoli forests, and I suspect many children will too. Such spurs to imagination are

powerful for mental development, especially when, as here, the author provides only a starting point from which a reader is then motivated to play out the scene in story-like fashion. In that sense, *A World of Food* is something like Chris Van Allsburg's incomparable and profound *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Although a child would certainly be drawn to *A World of Food* on his or her own and engage in it independently, my countless hours of reading picture books with my own children assure me that the richest way to experience this book is that classic configuration: adult and child pouring over pages together.

I also think Warner's choice of food as an artistic medium is worth considering. On one hand, it's a simple and powerful motivator for children—something Ronald Dahl seems to have understood with every fiber of his body. But I think this book does more than that. Just now we're in the middle of a general "consciousness-raising" about food topics, as well we should be, since many crucial issues are involved. So, how do we gently introduce children to a national conversation of this sort, much of which is, even if not over their heads, not naturally interesting to them? One way is to present food as Warner has—as something vital, universal, positive, and healthy. Kids will learn a great deal simply by identifying or trying to identify different types of food in the landscapes. Though Warner is realistic—he includes an ice cream castle and a chocolate locomotive that certainly got my attention—most of the foods he uses are very healthy, and he presents them, pun intended, in "the best light."

I feel bound to point out that the accompanying poetic text isn't all it should be. Some of the lines don't scan, some even awkwardly change the number of beats per line, and there are forced rhymes. Still, the text is rich in vocabulary, and it often helps clarify the visuals. And the visuals, of course, are where the power of this book lies. Warner has managed to use almost nothing but foods to create believable natural features, from white-bread clouds to cucumber redwoods to a mayonnaise river, even a rippling sea was somehow constructed out of the bodies of fish. His world is a peaceful and stable version of the Land of Chewandswallow, with something of the spirit of the Peaceable Kingdom thrown in. It's simply amazing, and I think most children, as well as their grownups, will love entering it with him as their guide.

About the Author

Tim Myers is a writer, songwriter, storyteller, visual artist, and university lecturer. He won a poetry contest judged by John Updike and has published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. His *Glad to Be Dad: A Call to Fatherhood* is out from Familius.com. He has also published eleven children's books. Find him at www.TimMyersStorySong.com.