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The Happy Lion

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

2

In a little French zoo lives a happy lion. He has his own enclosure, and lots of people visit him to say bonjour. The lion loves his friends ? especially Francois, the keeper's son - so when he notices an open gate, he decides to go a-visiting. The townspeople don't seem very pleased to see him, though. They do strange, confusing things like fainting and running away, and Lion can see firemen advancing on him with a hose. What are they doing? Luckily for all concerned, Francois arrives and Lion decides to go back quietly to the zoo where he can be safe and happy once again.

First published in 1954 and illustrated by Caldecott-medal-winning Duvoisin with alternating black-and-white and two-colour spreads, this charmingly-illustrated book has genuine mid-century styling and will appeal to art lovers as well as the nostalgia market. The lion is drawn with great sensitivity and Duvoisin's tawny palette is pleasingly appropriate.

Fatio's text is well-structured for attentive listeners aged 3+, but the story itself poses some challenges. For some readers this will be a heartwarming tale about a cheerful lion who realizes where true friendship lies. For others, it may feel less comfortable. Children these days are more aware of animal welfare and the lion's old fashioned and rather barren zoo enclosure may strike a discordant note. The lion's relationship with the townsfolk isn't straightforward, either. ?I suppose this must be the way people behave when they are not at the zoo,? thinks the lion, confronted with the terror he inspires. Having believed himself loved for his essential self and certain that those who come to see him are his friends, Lion discovers this to be untrue. Only Francois understands him. To be acceptable in the eyes of others, Lion must ?un-lion? himself and return to his enclosure.

Fatio assures us on the final page that he remains a Happy Lion, but tellingly remarks that ?if you opened his door, he would not want to go out visiting again." And it's this exposure of the gap between Lion's understanding of the situation and its reality that raises questions around wildness and ?othering?. Even though young readers may not be able to articulate their concerns, they ? and we ? are being propelled into uncomfortable territory. There is no possible outcome for Lion that allows him to be happy by expressing his own needs and desires, and this is something that sensitive readers may not enjoy.

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-happy-lion>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/237>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/carey-fluker-hunt>