

Children's Book Review

Barasch, Lynne (2007). *Hiromi's hands*. New York: Penguin Young Readers Group. 40 pp., ISBN: 9781584302759 (hc). \$16.99. (Ages 5-11)

Reviewed by Lauren Brothers, Rutgers University, U. S. A.

Smelly, slimy, scaly...it's just fish, right? Not to Hiromi Suzuki. Born to Japanese immigrant parents, Hiromi is your typical young child living in New York City, with one exception: she longs to be a sushi chef (*itamae*) like her father.

In her latest picture book, *Hiromi's Hands*, Lynne Barasch tells a lovely tale of the Suzuki family journey. Based on a character from her real life (Barasch's daughters' childhood friend), Hiromi begins her story with Hiromi's father's humble beginnings, recounting his fascination with the local fishmonger, his apprenticeship, and his ascendancy to "full-fledged chef." His mother (Hiromi's grandmother), the reader is told, was glad that she had a son because, "A girl could never be a sushi chef. People thought a woman's soft, warm hands would spoil the fish."

When Hiromi's father is promoted to work at a sister's restaurant in New York, the new world intrudes upon the customs of the old. Soon after he meets Hiromi's mother, she becomes pregnant with Hiromi. Adopting the first person, Barasch narrates anecdotes of Hiromi's upbringing, which unites American and Japanese cultures. She shows the reader how Hiromi attended western school all week with her friends and then attended Japanese school on Saturdays. She acquaints the reader with the rituals and celebrations Hiromi's parents have taught her, such as *Setsuban*, the day before the first spring, and *Hinamatsuri*, Girls' Day. She convincingly and poignantly recounts Hiromi's painful struggle between wanting to assimilate and to maintain her traditional identity.

Using soft watercolors and ink, Barasch guides this story through three decades, the 1960s through the 1990s. Hiromi grows up and becomes her father's apprentice, despite the old custom against women being *itamae-san*. The story repeats itself during this time, as readers watch Hiromi perform the same functions that her father once performed, learning the same techniques and skills he once learned as a boy.

Barasch's presentation of first and second-generation Japanese immigrants is one of true respect and admiration. She lovingly describes the journey of Hiromi's father to America. He brings nothing but his gift for preparing sushi, his love for adventure, and a childlike sense of wonder. When he arrives at Penn Station in 1964, he is amazed by large crowds and a vending machine that produces a cold soda when putting a coin in a slot. Not least of all, he possesses a love for his heritage. When he meets and falls in love with Kaoru, another

Japanese immigrant, they pass their traditions and passion for their culture along to their new daughter, Hiromi.

Barasch is a concise writer, whose style focuses on important details. Nonetheless, her affection for Hiromi emanates from the page. She captures Hiromi's "American-like" childhood well without having to deny the "extras" in Hiromi's life—her ties to her Japanese heritage and culture. She affectionately tells an idealistic story of Hiromi's ability to braid together two cultures without losing their unique parts. *Hiromi's Hands* is an essential book that introduces westerners to the richness of Japanese culture while suggesting how immigrants might join and enrich American life.

Readers will also find the muted colors of the illustration entrancing. The story concludes with a concise glossary and pronunciation guide, along with Barasch's own telling of how this story came to fruition.