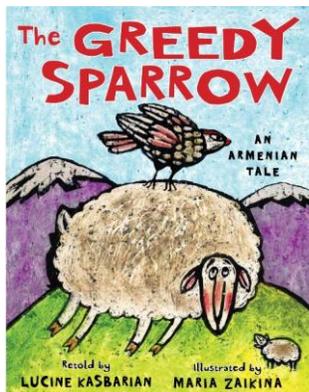


Children's Book Review

Kasbarian, Lucine. (2011). *The Greedy Sparrow*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation. 32 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0761458210. \$8.98 (ages 4-8)

Reviewed by Susan Bakay, Eastern University, U.S.A.



This classic Armenian folktale is a rolling romp of a story and is well worth reading aloud even with older children up to 8th grade. The story is playful and rhythmic, and the gorgeous illustrations are integral to the story line. It tells the story of a manipulative little sparrow who appears innocent enough to each passerby that they all grant his request to babysit the item he currently owns. When he does not return for whatever the item is, they use it. Shortly afterward the sparrow returns and is horrified to find that the item has not been cared for as he asked. He then demands they repay him with a nicer object. Each character does give up something new to the sparrow. Eventually, the sparrow's plan becomes obvious to the readers who are waiting to see what he acquires next. The greedy bird eventually has the tables turned on him, and he ends up right back where he started.

The illustrations in “The Greedy Sparrow” are woven tightly into the fabric of the story—text and action are embedded within the illustrations. A young, early reader would have no trouble reading this book independently in the classroom after hearing it read aloud because the illustrations are easy to interpret and the rhythmic language of the text is buried in talk bubbles within the artwork. The illustrations are bold and colorful, easily seen from a distance for a read aloud. The pictures are done in the primitive woodblock style of art, which brings the folk tale background more obviously to the forefront of the story. More subtly, the pictures use Armenian landscape and traditions to support the story: accurate traditional clothing, locations, and events are depicted within the primitive folk art appearance of the book.

Often, the telling of a folk tale does not include the culture from which the tale is taken. In this case, Kasbarian purposely sets out to share her own culture through this story. Using places and traditions from Armenia adds to the quality of the story, but also may provoke the reader to pose critical questions, such as “What do you mean he gave away his bride just because the sparrow wanted her?” or more simple questions about food and traditions: “What is an apricot?” or “Why is the bread round?”

An interesting area to explore with students might also come from the sparrow's requests for people to care for his various possessions. The initial request is not voiced. The sparrow asks for help removing a thorn from his foot. The helpful baker does so and throws the thorn away in the fire. At no point does the sparrow indicate that he might want it back. Time passes and the sparrow returns, demanding his thorn back. Later in the book the sparrow always asks the people to “mind my _____,” which

everyone gladly does until they have a need for the item. An interesting discussion about the quality of the request and the promises of the people to take care of someone else's things could take off from looking both at the greedy sparrow (who apparently knows human nature enough to be able to work the system right up to owning another person!) and at the people who did not take care of the sparrow's possessions as they promised.

For an older student audience, the underlying assumptions pose opportunities for teachers to question students' critical thinking abilities. Is it ever right to own another human being? Did the groom have any right to give his bride to the sparrow? Why is the lute more valuable than the bride? When might it be a good idea to break a promise? Would there ever be a case in which using an item in your care would supersede keeping it safe for its owner as promised? Using "The Greedy Sparrow" with older children also provides the opportunity for students to investigate the folktale genre, Armenian geography and culture or working on character motivation.

I recently had the chance to read this story with a class of second graders, one of whom happened to be a shy Armenian boy and, I later learned, a struggling reader. He was excited to be hearing a story he knew from home. Later, the teacher told me how much the same student pestered her to get the book and how he enjoyed reading it to his classmates. The teacher also witnessed his confidence to read other familiar books. At the end of the school year, the teacher saw him choose to read a book during free time; that was a first for him and, for a simple folktale picture book, a big result.