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Children's Reviews

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Magical City

The Wonderful Towers of Watts. Written by Patricia Zelver. Illustrated by Frane Lessac. Tambourine Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019. 1994. ISBN: 0-688-12649-9. 32 pp. US\$15.00.

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"One day, to the neighbors' amazement, something strange and beautiful rose up over the fence in Sam's backyard. It was a lacy web of steel, covered with a skin of concrete in which Old Sam had stuck glittering bits of tile, glass, mirrors, pottery, and seashells." Thus begins the fantastic, but true, story of Simon Rodia. As a young Italian immigrant, Rodia lived in a poor neighborhood of Los Angeles. Each day he rode the streetcar to the tilery where he worked, and returned each evening with large burlap bags of broken colored tiles. He spent his weekends combing vacant lots by the railroad tracks for broken glass and pottery and mirrors and seashells. Daily the neighborhood watched Old Sam as he journeyed — wearing his ragged overalls and tattered hat. Many thought Rodia was mentally unbalanced until the towers began to appear over the fence — towers that represented thirty-three years of work as Sam built his own magical city with streets, squares, and fountains. Sometimes he let the neighborhood children in to walk through the decorated maze and sit on starfish walls, but most of the time he worked

alone on into the night singing along with his beloved Italian opera music.

When Sam Rodia was eighty years old, he handed the key to his house to a neighbor, left, and never came back. The Towers of Watts remain to this very day, still astonishing visitors. The illustrations of this book capture the mood and wit of Old Sam with such cleverness and such detail that children can retell without being able to read the text. Be prepared to offer city maps of L.A. and stories of your own. Your students will not let this wonderful story be forgotten.

Adoption of a Leopard

Horace. Written by Holly Keller. Mulberry Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019. 1995. ISBN: 0-688-11844-5. 32 pp. US\$4.95.

Horace is a heart-warming story about a little leopard who is adopted by tiger parents. He gradually becomes upset because he doesn't look like his relatives, having spots, instead of stripes. After searching for a new family who look like him, he finds one and spends the day happily playing with them. At the end of the day he goes home and decides he is happy with his parents. This is an excellent book for 4, 5, and 6-year-olds starting to explore the idea of adoption and how it can be a beautiful experience. (SAS)

Toy Tales

The Tale of Pig, Bear, Frog, Duck. Written by Helen Cooper.

Four delightful, small books comprise a set. There is the same cast of characters, but in each book one of the four

protagonists — frog, bear, duck, pig — takes center stage. All of the main characters are toys, and it is characteristic of toys, in a household with all the dangers of vigorous love, stairs to fall down, washing machines, and pawings by an omnipresent cat, that they don't remain whole, shiny and new.

For a corduroy and cotton frog, stuffed with rice, a tiny rip becomes disastrous when the cat's shaking scatters the rice for mice to scurry away with. Help comes in the form of rags, and a needle and thread in skillful hands; then the frog is securely stuffed and thriving. When the cat hides the bear in the washbasket, the result is a soggy bear hung out to dry with clothespins on its ears, then dried and brushed — but will the child want the clean bear when the grubby one was so well loved? Yes, the ending is happy: "Dirty paws or clean golden hair, he loved his squashy old, saggy old Bear." The wheeled, wooden duck is the fastest of the toys, so its fall downstairs — was that a paw, pushing? — is a rapid descent to catastrophe. With wheels gone and tail off, at the end it has the honor to wave the winner's flag for the toys that continue to race. In the story of the ceramic pig, whose contents are spent for glue to reassemble its pieces after it's tipped off a shelf by the cat, the final illustration shows a parade of toys: frog riding a firetruck, bear perched on a tractor, patched pig riding in a truck, flagwaving duck.

In each of the four books, endpapers patterned like colorful parquet have insets picturing the four toys, with a central diamond showing the toy-hero of the particular book. Helen Cooper has planned her stories lovingly, and they are sturdy enough to survive young readers' vigorous attention. (JMJ)