

Janet Russell and Jirina Marton, *Bella's Tree*.

Andrea Schwenke Wyle

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REVIEWS

Janet Russell and Jirina Marton, *Bella's Tree*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-88899-870-5.

BELLA'S TREE is a distinct delight on all fronts: the prose is melodic and memorable, the illustrations are engaging and evocative, and the book design suitable and subtle. The harmonious combination of these elements makes a masterly picture storybook that seems already to have stood the test of time. A look at the book from the outside in proves this *is* a book you can judge by the tale that its cover begins to tell.

The cover, with matte gold on its narrow rim and title, plants "Bella's Tree" in the centre of a snowy wood at dusk, and introduces us to two companions, a child and a dog, who have stepped into the foreground. Behind them stretches a canopy of bare branches and a few evergreens. The child's coat is similarly gold, worn with red winter scarf and mittens that match the thin red collar on her dog, connecting the two. Their mutual attention is on a stick, which prefigures the story of their search for a tree. Jirina Marton's pastel artwork sparkles more than its golden frame, capturing the texture of the physical setting and the magic of the moment.

The plain endpages are the rich reddish brown of earth and wood, which lies beneath the snow and grows above it. Both connote the warmth and groundedness that pervade the story. The half-title page has no type, but its small, softly edged picture of a few trees in a wintry landscape, their shadows stretching to the right lower edge, draws us deeper into the cover's snowy woods. On the dedication page we have travelled into the vibrantly lit woods to a frozen stream bank. The orange light of dawn or dusk brings the snow to life in a rush of pink light that contrasts with the blue shadows and the sturdy darkness of bark and stream bank. The cover's thin, matte gold frame is repeated around the recto picture pages throughout the book, inset by a narrow line of gold in the cream-coloured paper.

The full title page presents us with the broader context of the Newfoundland coastal setting as the story begins "on top of a hill overlooking the sea" where "Bella, the girl, lived with her nan and Bruno, the famous dog." Janet Russell's im-

agery and turns of phrase are often both surprising and fitting: “Bruno’s fame came from bigness — not just bigness of body and bark but largeness of heart,” and pull together to paint the changing moods of the rural setting where this story of girl, nan, dog, birds, and trees unfolds.

The book is laid out in the traditional format of words on the verso and full-page pictures on the recto, with the exception of the final page, which faces the endpapers. Here the borders are altered to accommodate the final four sentences, and to connect us intimately with the wonders of the tree promised by the title. Several of the verso pages include softly edged inset pictures that highlight pertinent complementary details. The synergy of the whole is entirely pleasing.

The winter solstice has passed, Christmas is nigh, and Nan, “whose berry-roaming days were slowing down,” feels pressed by all the unpicked berries beneath the snow and is consequently “crooked” and without the energy to acquire the Christmas tree. Bella is determined to rectify the situation but must first convince Nan of her qualifications for the task. Upon being pronounced a “well-coordinated little gadget,” Bella begins her quest accompanied by Bruno. As with all such stories, there are errors and learning along the way. For each mistake, Nan gets a tree and gives a song, at a ratio of two to one, and the quest continues, conditional permission being granted along the way by various birds. You, too, can sing these songs provided you know the tunes “Miss Mary Mack” and “This Old Man.”

As with the finest of all such stories, every step in the process is to be relished for its part in the whole. Getting to the last page is, of course, wonderful, but you wouldn’t want to skip ahead because you’d miss “the beauty, the beautier, the beautiest” of Russell’s narration, descriptions, and dialogue, and the faces of disappointment and burgeoning joy in Marton’s illustrations. The narrator is a sure and gifted storyteller, echoing early details, when Bruno is described as “the large bark with the swollen heart, hanging off her heels”; reporting folk dialogue, such as “Bella, my trout ...”; or imaginatively explicating an element of the story: “Her voice brightened a smidgen. It was less like the bottom of a bog and more like the whining and squeaking of an old door.” The narration is largely focalized through Bella, except when we are privy to Bruno’s perspective, which he tries to communicate to Bella. The perennial interest of child, adult, and dog relations is distinguished by its regional flavour.

This is not the kind of Christmas story that warrants only a seasonal shelf life. Words and images complement one another; the whole poetic text lingers on in the mind in sight, sound, and song, assuring a lifetime warranty of delight in sustainable re-readings. Winner of the 2009 Governor General’s Award for Illustration. Highly Recommended for All.

Andrea Schwenke Wyile
Acadia University