Heckedy Peg

Captivated Me As A Child & Adult

In this story, seven sweet children are transformed by an evil witch into specific types of food. “The inherent drama of the story, combined with the haunting images the art provides, gives the picture book a timeless quality.”--Booklist

My Personal Review:
The books written by Audrey Wood and illustrated by her husband Don Wood do not get much better. Heckedy Peg is no exception. The sources of this particular story go back to the 16th century and they are presented in this work in a Grimm Brothers type format and mode...pure folk tale, both in telling and in illustration.

This is the story of a poor mother living near a small village with her seven children. The children are named Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. One day the mother must make a trip to the local market and informs her children that as they have been good, she will bring them each a present; their choice. Each choose and request an item. The mother then gives them stern warning that they are not to let any strangers in the house and they are not to touch the fire. Upon this, she departs.

Of course it is not long until an old woman shows up, a witch, an evil witch, and as the children are playing, she asks them if she can come in and light her pipe from the fire. At first the children refuse, but the witch informs them she has lost her legs; still to no avail, but when she offers gold, the children relent and let the witch in and use the fire to light her pipe. That is when their troubles begin. The old woman changes them into various forms of food and hauls them off to her cave to have dinner. Upon return the mother finds her children missing and is tipped off by a bird and her quest to retrieve her children begins.
First the narrative: Personally I feel that Audrey Wood is one of the best writers of childrens books in the business. I have yet to run across a bit of her work that I did not like, and more importantly, have never found one of her books that children did not enjoy. With this particular work, she has used the mode of the fairy tale or folk tale and used it quite effectively. The reader is instantly reminded of either the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson. Wood stays true to the format through to the end. This work captures the times (16th century fairy setting), perfectly.

Secondly: the illustrations in this book are absolutely the best. Details, blends of color, the darkness, shading and stetting match the text perfectly and are an absolute feast for the eyes. This is one of those works that can be viewed over and over again and something new will be spotted with each viewing. His human figures are absolutely delightful; think of a softer Thomas Hart Benton and you have a good idea of what this artist is doing.

Now there are aspects of this story that are rather dark; kidnapping and lets face it, implied cannibalism could quite well be a bit scary for some children. The paintings are dark for the most part and do have a brooding aspect to some of them. Each parent knows their own child best and it is at this point that parental judgment should be used. Each child is different. In my own experience I have not found this to be a problem as I have found most kids delight in this sort of thing. Again though, that is the parents call.

On the other hand this book teaches many good lessons; not letting strangers in the house, not playing with fire and to listen to your mom, not being the least. It is also a wonderful example of a mothers love for her children. We can throw I some other lessons such as greed for gold and such, and a good readers should be able to come up with several more as the book is being read to the child. I can remember a version of this one being read to me at a very young age and the lessons did indeed make an impression.

Last, but not least, there is a aspect of this book that is great for reading one on one or to a group. tell the child or children they must listen closely as there is a riddle they must solve. When you get to the par where the mother must solve the problem the witch gives her in order to save her children, have the kids give it a try...they will delight in this. Also, Audrey Wood has written several dozen books for children. I have yet to find one that I have not been extremely pleased with.

Great book...one of the best.

Don Blankenship
The Ozarks

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