The Reluctant Dragon by Robert D. San Souci

Wonderful Book.

When Jack's father discovers a fire-breathing dragon living close to home, Jack tells everyone not to worry -- he has read a lot about dragons. The next day, Jack meets him and learns that he is poet who would rather write than fight knights and breathe fire. Soon Jack and the dragon are sharing poetry and singing songs, but Jack can't keep him a secret for long. One day, Saint George rides into town to slay the beast, but the dragon refuses to take part in something so uncivilized. So with the help of Jack, they agree to stage a mock battle which turns out to be a hit.

My Personal Review:
The original "St. George and the Dragon" story is a frightening tale. Depending on which version you read, the townspeople give the scaly, stinking, vicious, dragon tribute of two sheep per day, and, when they invariably run out of sheep, they begin feeding it their own children. The King is obviously horrified, but what can he do? However, when the lottery selects his own daughter, who should appear but Sir George, (later the patron Saint of England) just in time for the king, if not for the subjects. The daughter worries for his safety, but the knight spears the dragon in its one vulnerable spot, then in a gallant display, borrows the daughter's girdle to drag the wounded dragon down to the town. For his own tribute, George asks only that the citizens become baptized; after this, he cuts off the dragon's head. Not a good ending for the dragon, but then, he wasn't a very nice dragon.

Like others before him, Kenneth Grahame modified this bloody tale for the consumption of the very young, and turned it completely on its head. This dragon would rather sleep than slay, purr than prey, and his true nature is discovered by a tow-headed young boy who gradually becomes friends with the pacifist, poetry-loving beast ("why I wouldn't hurt a fly."). Lay low, he advises him. Naturally, though, St. George arrives, and everyone acts as expected--except for the dragon. He simply refuses to attend his own demise:
"Well, tell him [St. George] to go away," said the dragon. "I'm sure he's not nice. Say he can write if he likes. But I won't see him." The boy, however, understands the underlying social pressures (which echo those of the British class system during Grahame's time) and replies: "But you've got to," said the boy. "You've got to fight him, you know, because he's St. George and you're the dragon."

The dragon, the knight, and the young boy, a person with neither power nor social distinction, make a plan. The plan is simple: Fake it. And so, like one of Vince McMahon's TV "wrestling" matches, St. George and the Dragon have it out, with flames and fury, and, as St. George just barely pierces the dragon in a pre-arranged safe spot. The townspeople, who have brought picnics for the presumed slaughter, were satisfied with the spectacle: "And all the others were happy because there had been a fight, and-well, they didn't need any other reason."

The original story, one of several short studies published in Grahame's "Dream Days" (1898, ten years before Grahame's most famous and beloved work, "The Wind in the Willows") may be found at http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=GraDrea.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=7&division=div1. Grahame wrote "The Reluctant Dragon" long at times, and one sees his concerns with religion and nature so evident in the river adventure scene of Wind in the Willows. Inga Moore takes out most of the slower, descriptive narrative (which might be enjoyed by older readers), and focuses instead on the dragon/boy/St. George relationships and the exciting battle. Compare the following excerpts (the first is Grahame's); this is great abridgement except for the inexplicable deletion of the last sentence, a very funny, modernist touch by Graham:

1. Then a cloud of smoke obscured the mouth of the cave, and out of the midst of it the dragon himself, shining, sea-blue, magnificent, pranced splendidly forth; and everybody said, "Oo-o-o-o-o!" as if he had been a mighty rocket! His scales were glittering, his long spiky tail lashed his sides, his claws tore up the turf and sent it flying high over his back, and smoke and fire incessantly jetted from his angry nostrils. "Oh, well done, dragon!" cried the Boy, excitedly. "Didn't think he had it in him!" he added to himself.

2. Then a cloud of smoke billowed from the mouth of the cave, and out of the midst of it the dragon himself, shining, sea-blue, magnificent, pranced splendidly forth; and everybody said, "Oo-o-o-o-o!" His scales were glittering, his long spiky tail lashed his sides, his claws tore up the turf and sent it flying high over his back, and smoke and fire jetted from his nostrils. "Oh, well done, dragon!" cried the Boy, excitedly. "Didn't think he had it in him!" he added to himself.
Moore also displays great taste and talent in her beautiful colored pencil and ink drawings. She draws landscapes and houses in a traditional style with meticulous shading and detail, trees show the undertones of illustration from a 1912 publication. The friendly, easygoing dragon is drawn showing an easy confidence and an engaging smile, but he's actor enough to look ferocious when required. He's drawn in one of the most striking shades of blue since the ceramic in the movie "Diva." Overall, Inga Moore honors the original Grahame story while making the story and pictures maximally entertaining for young children. Publisher Candlewick has done it again; this is an extraordinary book.

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