
El Señor H

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Señor H is a hippopotamus who, fed up with life in the zoo, and having been learning human words by eavesdropping on zoo visitors, politely asks one little girl to lift the latch on his cage, and wanders out into the city to try and make his way back to Africa. The rest of this short illustrated story consists of Señor H going around the city (possibly a Spanish city, although there are few enough markers that it could also be a South American one -- which would mean a translator, for one thing, wouldn't have too many problems of locality to overcome), asking one or two people if they know the way to Africa ('Africa Road, Africa Avenue or Africa Boulevard?' asks one lady), narrowly avoiding being run over when he nonchalantly crosses a busy main road, and going for a pizza, all the time blissfully unaware of his being out of place. What makes 'El Señor H' funny (very funny, I thought), and I think will make it appeal to its target readership (7, 8, 9-year-olds), is the ongoing absurdity that no one else notices either! People do notice he is different, but no one is alarmed specifically by his non-human-ness, or his hippo-ness; some kids hop on his back, mistaking him for a toy horse, for example, and a couple in the pizza restaurant are shocked by his bad manners when he eats 12 pizzas with his bare hands. It results in an understated frisson, a will-he-won't-he be hauled back to the zoo tension, that is wonderfully well-maintained, and balanced against Señor H's benignity and slightly hapless good fortune. I think children will enjoy knowing both slightly more than he does (for example when he sees the 'Porcupine Pizza' restaurant and racks his brains for how his friend Mr Porcupine could possibly have escaped the zoo and set up a business himself so quickly), and more than the characters who come into contact with him as well (for example the waitress who doesn't get it when he makes a joke about needing two chairs, given that he has four legs...).

Aimed at 7, 8 & 9-year-olds, *El Señor H* is great fun, with some old-fashioned public service type information also cleverly, undidactically injected along the way (the characteristics and provenance of certain exotic birds; a zookeeper who advises Señor H to eat better if he wants to try and get through the exit stile in the future), so that young readers will learn some things, but I don't think feel like they're being talked down to. I can see parents relishing reading it with their children too, because there are a number of quiet jokes that children won't necessarily pick up on -- without detracting from or obscuring the under 10's content. There's something simply touching about Señor H's hope to return to the forest where he grew up; the final note is lovely, the kind of thing I can imagine children reading time and again with their parents: after his 12 pizzas, and after the waitress has let him off the bill (because she was pleased that he enjoyed the food so much!), Señor H finds he has wandered back to the zoo, and the security guard says would he like to get back in his cage? but instead he wanders slightly mournfully off, still certain he'll find Africa. I don't think we entirely suspect he won't, in a way, whilst also knowing it's probably impossible; a lovely, ambiguous, possible hopeful final chord, in other words.

The illustrations are colourful, expressive, many of them full bleed on the page. I found many of the pictures funny in and of themselves -- perfect for parents reading with children, I imagine -- I myself laughed out loud at the one where Señor H shakes the two would-be cowboys off his back (they are a few feet up in the air, half off-page).

In terms of its commercial viability, I know that it might be a bit of an obstacle the fact that it's already been originated, designed, produced in another language, without a co-edition agreement in place... But from my point of view, I can see numerous things that make *El Señor H* extremely sellable to publishers.

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