

A Refugee Childhood

Anna's Goat. Janice Kulyk Keefer. Illus. Janet Wilson. Orca, 2000. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-153-X.

Anna's Goat is the first book for children written by novelist, poet, and critic Janice Kulyk Keefer, winner of the 1999 Marian Engel Award. Based on a true experience of World War II, *Anna's Goat* reflects Keefer's interest in exploring in her writing her own ethnicity.

Anna is born during wartime in an unspecified "faraway place" where "it was always winter." When the mother has no milk for her baby, the village women provide a nanny goat that becomes a companion to Anna and her older sister Wanda. When the war is over and the family returns to their bombed-out city, Anna joins the other children in searching the rubble for some "treasure" — "something that would keep on shining, even in the dark." Because Anna fails to find such a treasure, her mother gives her a fringed blue towel to remind her of the warmth and softness of the nanny goat.

Each illustration occupies more than one page, with additional sketches that clarify, emphasize, or amplify details in the text. For instance, a sketch of the goat pulling down the towel and another of the goat mouthing the towel indicate to the reader what the text never spells out explicitly: that this is the same towel given later to Anna. Janet Wilson's gold and brown drawings (crayon on coloured paper) suggest the sepia tones of old photographs, and against this brown background, the blue of the towel stands out (this colour is repeated in the endpapers). When the goat appears in a doorway, it is back-lit and seems to move forward out of the sepia background, like a divine messenger. In the final scenes depicting the adult Anna, now a sculptor in Canada who creates "birds and suns and mermaids — and nanny goats, of course," bright reds and greens enliven and set apart the pages.

Images of the prewar city and of the thatched village houses identify the setting as Eastern Europe, most likely Ukraine. We are told that "It was a bitter time, and a hard, hard place," yet the ugliness of war is only suggested by the angled lines of the interior scenes and featured in two views of the city "bombed into rubble." The mother's suffering is visually suggested by the way in which she is framed by pillars of factory machines, echoing the composition of traditional

Ecco Homo paintings. The characters' faces do show some tiredness, and even the children's eyes are a bit shadowed; nevertheless, although the text states that the family suffer cold and have "hardly any food to eat," they appear to be well fleshed, the children cute and cherubic.

Most of the illustrations zero in on the human figures, especially on faces and hands, thus emphasizing the characters' physical closeness. In the opening scene, mother and daughters are encircled by the father's protective arms. In the second, the mother holds the two daughters. In the last scene set in the past, Anna lies dreaming, her head and upper body encircled by a spirit goat. Indeed, hugging is the most prevalent action depicted in the book (in more than half the illustrations). Except for a small picture of the goat being milked and another of the goat trying to eat the wash, not much activity occurs. Anna never does anything active: she observes or sleeps or nestles against the goat. Even when other children are searching for treasures, she simply crouches on the rubble. The lone dynamic scene occurs on the cover, which shows a girl and a goat playing tug-of-war. In spite of beginning with Anna's birth, the story initially focuses on Wanda; it is Wanda's profile, for instance, that dominates the scene of the goat's arrival. The focus then shifts from children with mother to children with goat. Yet after the family's return to their home city, Wanda fades from both text and illustrations. Most child readers or listeners will wonder what has happened to Wanda, for she appears to have been replaced by Anna. In fact, the two girls are not clearly distinguished — except, at first, by size. This impression is reinforced at the two crucial moments in the story, where the same words are used to describe the girls' reactions. When the nanny goat arrives, "Wanda stared and stared, and then looked up at her mother, asking the question just with her eyes." When the mother later evokes memories of the goat, "Anna looked up and asked her a question, just with her eyes."

In general, then, the illustrations do not do full justice to the text. They are disappointing after Wilson's earlier work, such as *Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt* and *Sarah and the New Red Dress*, where the girls are active individuals rather than pretty dolls. Obviously, a picture book for children is not expected to dwell on the horrors of war, but in *Anna's Goat*, the emphasis on sweetness and harmony can be cloying at times. In spite of this, the book succeeds in demonstrating how innovative solutions can help people cope with adversity and how memories of a harsh past can be creatively transformed and used.

Diana Shklanka teaches at the University College of the Cariboo.

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