‘The Hundred Dresses’: A Middle-Grade Book About Empathy, Forgiveness, and Trusting Your Inner Voice

Children’s Book Review

By JULIE MILLER April 17, 2017

**THE HUNDRED DRESSES** ISBN 9780152051709

By Eleanor Estes with Forward by Helena Estes

80 pp. Harcourt. New York, NY. 2004. $7.99 paperback. (Middle grade; ages 8 to 12)

Wanda Petronski is a very quiet, poor Polish immigrant girl that just wants to be liked by the other girls at school. Eleanor Estes describes Wanda’s approach to the school social scene vividly: “Wanda slowly approached the group of girls. With each step forward, before she put her foot down she seemed to hesitate for a long, long time. She approached the group as a timid animal might, ready to run if anything alarmed it.” When Wanda tries to fit in with the other girls by telling them about her one hundred dresses she has in her closet at home, they assume she is lying because Wanda wears the same dress to school every day. The teasing begins, led by Peggy, the most popular girl in school. Peggy’s best friend Maddie silently disapproves of Peggy teasing Wanda. When Wanda is suddenly withdrawn from school, Maddie, agonizes about how Wanda must have felt about being teased and seeks to find Wanda to apologize. Estes treatment of Maddie’s conscience masterfully evokes empathy: “She could put herself in Wanda’s shoes. But she had done just as much as Peggy to make life miserable for Wanda by simply standing by and saying nothing. She had helped to make someone so unhappy that she had had to move away from town.” A similar feeling of empathy is induced in Woodson’s handling of Chloe’s regret for bullying Maya in “Each Kindness”.

“The Hundred Dresses” was inspired by a poorly treated classmate of Estes in elementary school. This timeless book’s real strength is in the feelings of empathy and forgiveness it stirs up so skillfully. Readers will see themselves in Maddie and find hope that they can trust their inner voice and stand up for what is right. This would be an excellent book for elementary school children.