

means about his life now. Though the secret past event itself—a stint in a children’s home and a boating accident upon his retrieval by his grandfather—is implausible in its elaborate high melodrama, the storytelling is polished and compelling while remaining accessible to a young audience. Sam’s literacy issues aren’t merely included for didactic value, as they play a key role in heightening the suspense and bringing him together with Caroline, and it’s also clear that they’re shaping his personality and his class role in troubling ways. There are also touches of classic orphan-story pleasures here, with Sam living an idyllic life with his grandfather and friendly collective of neighbors and additional tension deriving from the possibility that his discovery may destroy this utopia. This will therefore intrigue fans of Giff’s *Pictures of Hollis Woods* (BCCB 12/02) and other home-finding tales as well as those readers who enjoy a smooth tale of psychologically touched mystery. DS

HELAKOSKI, LESLIE *Woolbur*; illus. by Lee Harper. HarperCollins, 2008 [32p]

Library ed. ISBN 978-0-06-084727-2 \$17.89

Trade ed. ISBN 978-0-06-084726-5 \$16.99

Reviewed from galleys

Ad 5-8 yrs

Poor Maa and Paa: their son, Woolbur, is causing them no end of worry as he strays from the sheep norm. Woolbur runs with the dogs, cards his own wool while he’s in it, and dyes himself bright blue—and each time he greets his anxious parents with a happy “Isn’t it great!” Gleeful, heedless Woolbur is endearing in his enthusiasm and inventiveness as well as his independence, and the book’s clear structure will let kids feel like insiders in predicting the pattern. That structure has a few too many iterations, however, and it winds the story up for a big, funny tension-release that never really comes. Instead, the story disappointingly underplays its dénouement and muddles its message (parents, be careful what you wish for? Individualism is good because otherwise we wouldn’t recognize our children?), and nothing ever comes of Grandpaa’s wise admonitions of “Don’t worry.” The combination of intense color throughout and arresting texture in both sheep coats and landscape elements makes some of the illustrations too busy for successful focus, and audiences are going to immediately ask why Woolbur doesn’t stay blue after he’s dyed himself, but the nubbly-coated lamb, his fleece twisted in dreadlock-like cardings, has the happy magnetism of the contented eccentric. Use this with Puttock’s *Miss Fox*, reviewed below, to talk about individuality—or just to romp with some entertaining sheep. DS

HOLMES, MARY TAVENER *My Travels with Clara*; illus. by Jon Cannell. Getty, 2007 36p

ISBN 978-0-89236-880-8 \$17.95

R 6-9 yrs

With her big ears, substantial girth, and saggy skin, she was the toast of mid-eighteenth century Europe. Clara the rhinoceros, an orphan from India, ended up in the care of Dutch sea captain Douwe Van der Meer, who rightly calculated that she would be a sensation—a lucrative sensation, at that—among the royalty and chattering class throughout the continent. Here Van der Meer himself provides the breezy narration, regaling readers with details of Clara’s appetite (sixty pounds of hay daily, and a penchant for oranges and beer), transport (eight horses to pull a custom-made crate loaded on a wagon), and public acclaim (Frederick the Great brings his whole court and leaves a big tip). Text and illustrations take the form of

a scrapbook of paintings, doodles, journal entries, and reproductions of souvenirs and period artwork, with arrows that direct attention to points of particular interest, such as a porcelain rhino “made in the city of Meissen,” or a pile of “Clara poop” in the corner of Pietro Longhi’s oil painting, *The Rhinoceros*. Notes on contemporary artwork and a pronunciation guide are welcome added touches. Although Holmes’ title is intended as a companion book to the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition of paintings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, who created a life-sized portrait of the fetching Clara, the quirky subject and vivid presentation will find an appreciative audience beyond museum-goers. Pair this with Mary Jo Collier’s *The King’s Giraffe* (BCCB 3/96) for a look at the eccentric enthusiasms of our fad-crazed ancestors. EB

JONELL, LYNNE *Emmy and the Incredible Shrinking Rat*; illus. by Jonathan Bean. Holt, 2007 346p
ISBN 978-0-8050-8150-3 \$17.95 R Gr. 4-7

Ever since her parents inherited a great deal of money and a huge mansion from a distant relative, Emmy has seen them less and less as they take long vacations and leave her in the care of Miss Barmy, an officious and unpleasant nanny. What’s more, nobody seems to notice her at her new school except the class rat, and he bites her. Oddly, he also talks to her. In a fit of rebellion, she sets the rat free, skips her dance class, and wanders into a seedy section of downtown that she knows Miss Barmy would never approve of, where she finds a store with a secret business of renting out rodents with strange powers, including one that Miss Barmy has been using on her parents to make them stay away, and one that she has been using on Emmy’s schoolmates to make them forget about her. The rat she freed has the power to make people shrink, and when he accidentally shrinks one of Emmy’s classmates, the trio—Emmy, the rat, and the now-diminutive Joe—embarks on an adventure that leads them to discover a whole rodent city underground, a shrunken but still spry rodent scientist, and the way out of Emmy’s difficulties with the nefarious Miss Barmy. With an evil nanny, bewitched parents, and lots of cute, furry helpers, this is irresistible storytelling, drawing on the best traditions of Redwall, Narnia, and Wonderland with a healthy dose of Lemony Snicket thrown in. Jonathan Bean’s border illustrations form a flip book that features the rat, who is blustery, arrogant, and only accidentally helpful (though he does become a hero of sorts in the end), getting his just deserts by falling from a tree. As a read-alone or a shared read-aloud, this will be a winner with fans of light fantasy, animal tales, and mild gothic adventure. KC

KENAH, KATHARINE *The Best Chef in Second Grade*; illus. by Abby Carter. Harper Collins, 2007 48p (I Can Read Books)
Library ed. ISBN 978-0-06-053562-9 \$16.89
Trade ed. ISBN 978-0-06-053561-2 \$15.99 R Gr. 1-3

Everyone in second grade is the best at something, except Ollie. His spirits rise, however, when he finds out that the famous food-tossing, dessert-igniting Chef Antonia from TV is coming to his class. Since Ollie loves to cook, his excitement increases when his teacher asks each student to discover and prepare his or her family’s favorite dish to share with Chef Antonia. Desperate to find his “Family Favorite,” Ollie questions his family repeatedly, but picky little sister Rosy torpedoed one suggestion after another. Finally, everyone settles on macaroni and cheese (“But only if it has a face,” insists Rosy), and Ollie’s fruit-faced macaroni and cheese is a