

Beautifully illustrated story

Review by Deborah S. McGee

The Magic Leaf

written by Winifred Morris, illustrated by Ju Hong Chen.
Atheneum, MacMillan Publishing.

Cozy hours spent reading children's books snuggled into bed with loved ones, plus a stint driving bookmobile in rural Virginia are my experience with children's literature.

So Winifred Morris's *The Magic Leaf* was a pleasant excursion into once more familiar territory.

Oregon writer Morris has written *The Magic Leaf*, her first picture book, in simple, direct language and with a merry twinkle in her eyes. Shanghai-born Ju-Hong Chen, who now lives in Oregon, illustrated it with lovingly rendered watercolors: pastel landscapes and human-figured tableaux of Old World China, complete with airy pagodas, graceful peacocks, laughing dragons and a kitchen noodle-making scene.

In the story Lee Foo, a person of average intelligence, thinks he's very smart, for, "Did he not read very big books the way smart men are supposed to do?" Through a series of events—the loss of a sword, buying new shoes, and finally discovering what he thinks is a magic leaf—Foo gently learns to accept the truth about himself.

It's a neat twist on the plot of many children's books, in which the main character has a grand triumph of some sort. The learning which Lee Foo does is cumulative and does not involve conquering someone else. With a Chinese illustrator, and a setting in China, *The Magic Leaf* reflects an underlying philosophy best described by the phrase "No blame," sprinkled throughout the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, which many consider a fount of Eastern wisdom. No one is at fault as Foo grows as a person, especially not his lovable self.

Of course, a major criteria for judging children's literature is, would kids like it? It's a tricky question and anyone who's worked with young people knows how finicky they can be in their reading tastes.

Although I don't have a readily



Illustration by Ju-Hong Chen.

available test audience, I thought back to days as bookmobile librarian. Is *The Magic Leaf* one I would have plucked from the library's shelves, carried to the bookmobile, and done the necessary paperwork for? Yes, most definitely. Would I have been able to interest readers in it? I'd bet on it.

What particular kids would the book appeal to? It's a good read-aloud for ages 7-10, a good read for ages 9-12, and probably more appealing to girls than boys. I would reject it for the pre-schoolers at the Head Start where I stopped—only a few of those younger children would have been able to appreciate it before becoming too squirrely. But I'd definitely have had it in hand when grades 3 and up of the Blue Mountain Waldorf School came on board the book-lined step van; in fact, I probably would first pass it on to their teacher who was always hungry for such books: artfully illustrated fairy tales with life-

affirming values.

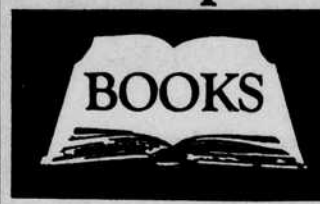
Finally, would *The Magic Leaf* pass the snuggle book test? Not as well as *Winnie the Pooh*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Lion and Blue*, or *The Secret Garden*. But those are among the greatest children's classics. The new book, though, would make for a most pleasant 20 minutes at bedtime any cold winter night.

The Magic Leaf is especially good for adults and children who enjoy the special bonding that comes from reading a book aloud together. Its story is simple enough to capture the attention of children, while simultaneously charming an adult reader, paired traits found in the most successful children's books.

Vocabulary words in the book to discuss before reading: scholar, mishap, cicada, peonies—maybe praying mantis.

The Magic Leaf would make a fine gift for children 7 to 12 years of age.

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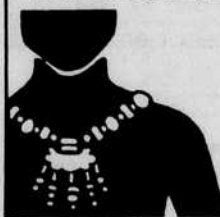
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