Kevin O'Malley

The Great Race

United States of America (2011)

TAGS: Aesop Aesop's Fables





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General information	
Title of the work	The Great Race
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2011
First Edition Details	Kevin O'Malley, *The Great Race*. New York: Walker Books, 2011, 32 pp.
ISBN	9780802723574
Genre	Picture books
Target Audience	Children
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Creators



Kevin O'Malley , b. 1961
(Author, Illustrator)

Kevin O'Malley is an American illustrator and writer of picture books, based in Baltimore, Maryland. He has published over twenty self-illustrated picture books, and illustrated over twenty picture books by other writers, including the *Miss Malarkey* series by Judy Finchler. He was inspired to write and draw when he read Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* as a child. He graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art, and worked as a commercial illustrator before moving into picture books. His work is known for a wry sense of humour, in which he exploits unexpected meanings in common phrases and ideas. Classical material is not a feature of his work, though he also wrote and illustrated *Mount Olympus Basketball* (2003).

Sources:

Official website (accessed: March 13, 2020)

"Kevin O'Malley," in Something About the Author, Vol. 320, Gale 2017, pp. 146-151.

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Summary

This comic retelling of the Aesop's fable, the Hare and the Tortoise, opens with the Hare, Lever Lapin, revelling in his fame. He has books written about him (*He's Gone*, by Otto Sight, *He's on Fire*, by Stan Wellback), and is arrogant (his autobiography is entitled *Fast Feet and Amazing Good Looks*). Everyone admires him. Irritated, Nate Tortoise goes to his favourite restaurant (La Gaganspew) , where he is further annoyed by a group of ladies gossiping admiringly about Lever Lapin. "Can't a tortoise just enjoy a meal in peace without hearing about Lever Lapin? I mean, really, he's just a runner. I could probably even beat him in a race." (p. 5). Unfortunately the ladies hear him. At that moment, Lever Lapin walks in with an entourage of assistants, and Nate is pushed to eat at an inferior table. Muttering a little too loudly, Nate again insults Lever Lapin: "He's so dumb, if it were raining soup, he'd head outside with a fork. You know, I do believe I could beat this guy in a race." (p. 9). This time the whole restaurant hears Nate, including Lever Lapin, and the pair challenges one another to a race. Nate spends the week training (chasing after the ice cream truck, running to the pastry shop).

The race begins, and immediately Lever Lapin is out of sight, while Nate plods down the road. "He's so slow, he's gonna get a parking ticket," comments a watching snail (p. 19). Lever, excited by the cheering crowds starts to show off, yelling "when you're as great as me, it's hard to be humble" (p. 21). He shows off for a long time, then decides to have a break at the restaurant, La Gaganspew, where he takes so long signing autographs and kissing ladies, that Nate overtakes him and wins the race. The story finishes with Nate, sitting at his favourite table at La Gaganspew, sipping tea and reading the newspaper. The headline reads: "Better Nate than Lever", and Nate says: "I couldn't agree more" (p. 30).

Analysis

This comic picture book retells the famous fable of Aesop, *The Hare and the Tortoise*, highlighting the moral of the story, namely competitiveness and aggression do not win in the face of solid endurance. In a small-town setting, with anthropomorphised animal characters, the race is cast in terms of a celebrity (Lever Lapin) and an ordinary guy (Nate Tortoise). The competition between two types of masculinity is underscored by insults, which the two protagonists offer to one another, and the emphasis on physical attainment. Lever

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Lapin is sidelined not merely by laziness and arrogance, but by the lure of celebrity and the adulation of the crowd, while Nate Tortoise, clad in a neat suit when he is not plodding along in the race, is constructed as a solid middle-class citizen. Nate's lack of attraction for "the ladies" may further emphasize his underdog status.

The story's comedy draws heavily on punning and insult-comedy, playing up the competition as going beyond the race. The final headline of the story, "Better Nate than Lever," both underscores the moral, and makes for a satisfying, if groan-inducing, pun. This is an example of double-coding, often used in picture books to appeal to adults as well as to children: adults will get the pun and explain it to children. It is also a traditional shaggy-dog story, in which an elaborate story leads to a pun.

Aesop's Hare and Tortoise is a natural fit for a comic retelling. It is a commonly retold fable, appearing several times in the Arne-Thompson-Uther index of folktales. In the United States, it is commonly received through Joel Chandler-Harris's version in his *Brer Rabbit* tales (see here, accessed: March 13, 2020).

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Aesop Aesop's Fables

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Animals Character traits Conflict Masculinity Sport Success and failure Values

Further Reading

Hall, Edith, "Aesop: the Morphing Fabulist", in Hodkinson, Owen and Helen Lovatt, eds., C*lassical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*, I. B. Tauris, 2018, 89–107.

Hall, Edith, "Our Fabled Childhood: Reflections on the Unsuitability of

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Aesop to Children", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood . . . The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adult*s, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 169–182.

Kubiak Ho-Chi, Beata, "Aesop's Fables in Japanese Literature for Children: Classical Antiquity and Japan", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., O*ur Mythical Childhood . . . The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 189–200.

Movrin, David, "Aemulating Aesopus: Slovenian Fables and Fablers between Tradition and Innovation", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood . . . The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 208–218 .

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