

Reviews

Elsa and the Motmot

Author Danielle Thompson-Ochoa
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Reviewer Sue Denny, BATOD Cymru and NEC

This delightful story is the first book for children to be written by a deaf Caribbean author. It features a young deaf girl, Elsa, and the adventures she has on holiday. It is beautifully written and would appeal to young deaf readers and teenagers aged 10 – 14 but would also be good to share with hearing peers.

The story starts as Elsa is about to set off to spend a month on holiday with her grandparents in Taco, Trinidad, and she is very excited anticipating the fun she will have. Elsa's deafness and use of hearing aids is dealt with in a very matter of fact way, and there is a lot of scope for discussion about how she hears sounds, her problems with relying on lip reading, and the way other people communicate with her. This would be a useful area to consider for hearing readers too. It is clear from the start that, although Elsa may miss some speech, she is able to fill in the gaps and understand what is being said and this does not affect her ability to communicate and make decisions.

Elsa soon meets up with her old friend Nora, who is hearing, and also makes a new friend in a parrot named Simon. She discovers she has the ability to hear and understand what the parrot is saying and realises she shares her Aunt Lily's gift of connecting with the animals. Simon leads Elsa and Nora to rescue a baby motmot bird and return it to its nest. They are helped in this by a younger boy, Colin, who initially teases Elsa but soon stops when he realises how strong and brave she is. Together the friends are then caught up in a fast-paced adventure involving illegal hunters, a captured agouti (rodent), and a crocodile. Elsa stands up to the



hunters and is instrumental in them being caught and handed over to the police.

It is lovely to have a deaf lead character who is both strong and determined as well as being kind and thoughtful. Elsa is well drawn and is a good role model for her readers. As well as her empathy with and apparent ability to communicate with the animals – whether this is really a 'superpower' or just her imagination is not explained – she is also fair and understanding and good at keeping the peace between her sometimes argumentative friends.

The descriptions of the exotic and unfamiliar birds and animals and landscape are colourful and very visual, there are lots of pleasing black and white illustrations and the text is clear and easy to read. The chapters are short – the whole book is not too long – and reluctant readers would be encouraged to keep going. The descriptions of the location, the food and the animals are really vivid and would provide excellent topics for pupils to research and explore further.

The book also provides a number of opportunities for discussions, especially in terms of deafness and communication issues and around developing a positive deaf identity. This would be a good book to share with hearing children to reinforce their understanding of deafness and deaf awareness. Issues such as growing up, teasing and dealing with conflict are there for consideration as well, as is the inference of grief and loss around Elsa's Aunt Lily that runs in the background.

Elsa has a journal to write and this would be an excellent starting point for pupils to imagine and record further adventures for Elsa and her various friends. The end of the story, in many ways, feels like a new beginning for Elsa and her adventures would make a great series. Danielle Thompson-Ochoa has based the story on her childhood experiences but, unlike Elsa, she explains that she had a lonely childhood and took solace in reading. However, she never found a book with a deaf role model as the central character and wanted to create one. She also expresses a desire to inspire a love of reading in deaf children. I think with Elsa she has realised both these aims, and I would certainly recommend this book as an excellent addition to any class library.



Summary – marks out of 5	
Quality	5
Value for money	5
Educational usefulness	5
Overall	5

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