

All the Pretty Little Horses

Illustrated by Linda Saport
Clarion Books 1999



Reviewed by
Jennifer Shank

All the Pretty Little Horses is a traditional lullaby with unclear origins. It is thought to have its roots in the rural South, spreading throughout the United States the last 150 years. Several Internet sites host ongoing discussions of its meaning. There are indications the lullaby was once sung to the master's child by a slave as she listened to the cries of her own baby left alone. The reference to cakes and pretty horses allude to all the things not afforded to a slave's child. Some of the other lyrics associated with this song (but not found in this particular book) carry a darker element. In one version of the song, there is mention of the loss of the lamb's eyes and his subsequent cries after they had been plucked out. That version might not sit well with the pre-kindergarten set, yet it's worth noting to give context to the melancholy of the song.

This version of *All the Pretty Little Horses* must have been chosen by the illustrator for its rich word painting and imagery. Linda Saport's illustrations in the book are breathtaking. She uses pastels and soft lines to create a dreamy state between awake and asleep. Each two-measure phrase has a separate picture, and each picture evokes a sense of calm and wonder. The beautiful imagery also sets the tone of love, quiet and tranquility. The colors are soft, inviting and interesting to even the youngest of children.

The book can be read or sung depending on the use.

At the pre-kindergarten level,

it's not only a wonderful "lap time" book, but children can be encouraged to learn the song by rote. They can use movement to explore its word painting, or they can participate in dramatic play, acting out some of the song's phrases. The song, along with simple accompaniment, is included on the last page so it can be performed using piano, recorder, and guitar or arranged for Orff Instruments.

The book and lullaby can also play a part in elementary curriculum. The lullaby itself offers an opportunity to open sociological and historical discussions about African-American culture, how songs are passed aurally through generations, and specifically

what resources children had, depending on when and where they were raised. Often times, elementary school children have a tough time with historical and social contexts foreign to their own lives. Talking about the horse and cake in the song may help them know how children born into slavery were not permitted to have luxuries like cake.

This small but mighty book holds many teaching opportunities between its 32 pages. It is a must for any early childhood library and also has a place in elementary grade classrooms.

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