

When the Sky Is Like Lace

by Elinor Lander Horwitz • Illustrated by Barbara Cooney

Viking, 2004



Reviewed by
David Thaxton

Oddly enough, this book arrived at my doorstep in a box. Back in print 30 years after its original publication, *When the Sky Is Like Lace* still defies explanation. It is a tale of enchanted nighttime rituals that seem dreamt in the mind of a child, but told in the voice of a sage. Barbara Cooney's deep, luminous watercolors fill the pages with images both inviting and surreal. Together they weave what appears to be not so much a story as an invitation.

The language oscillates between vivid descriptors and whimsical constructions that pull the reader into the splendid strangeness of the night. "On bimulous nights, the sky is like lace..." begins the journey where otters sing and snails (insulted by the otters' song) march two by two to watch the trees "...eucalyptus back and forth, forth and back...in the fern-deep grove at the midnight end of the garden."

Though not mentioned directly in the text, the illustrations follow three young girls, barefooted and robed in billowy white nightgowns, through this imagery and into their own fanciful rituals. From following rules that seem like childish superstition, to eating, singing, exchanging gifts and cavorting about the forest, the night unfolds like a holiday with roots in ancient custom and dream-like imagination.

Particularly inviting are the opportunities for movement, singing and dramatization. From the trees "doing the eucalyptus," to marching snails, come images that beg to be danced, with underlying music or sound carpets rising from the text. This book bursts out of the box with descrip-

tions of grass that "...smells like gooseberry jam" and "...feels like the velvet inside a very old violin case." Words like these are ripe for interpretation through the language of music. The songs within the book are equally inviting opportunities for improvisation and original composition. The otters' song is set to the "Mexican Hat Dance," with the disclaimer of, "but you can sing it to any tune you like." This is probably just as well, because the scansion seems a little rough. The second song outright says, "You'll have to make up the tune yourself because it doesn't have one."

Even the lists of possible gifts and activities give a diverse array of whimsical choices ripe for dramatization. What child would not enjoy pretending to ride a camel bareback or tickle an elephant?

Taken as a whole, the book gives ample opportunities for child-centered and childlike creation. The unconventional language and imagery weave an open-ended canvas that supports a variety of approaches to artistic interpretation. As an addition to one's personal library, it won't likely stay long on any shelf, and certainly not in any box.

