



The Squirrel's Birthday and Other Parties

Toon Tellegen , Jessica Ahlberg (Illustrator)

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This charming little book is as delicious as a piece of cake—which just happens to be Squirrel’s favorite food! Young readers are invited to Squirrel’s birthday party—and into a magical world of the imagination. Brief, evocative, thought-provoking, and unlike anything else ever written, Toon Tellegen’s extraordinary tales are rich in unforgettable, even surrealistic images. A squirrel and an ant discover a mysterious feast with an invisible host in the depths of a forest. A whale and a seagull dance silently on a moon-drenched beach. A grasshopper pays a fortune for a speck of dust. Perfectly complemented by Jessica Ahlberg’s delicate illustrations, this collection is intelligent, moving, and funny.

The Squirrel's Birthday and Other Parties Details

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Author : Toon Tellegen , Jessica Ahlberg (Illustrator)

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Betsy says

My mother likes to say that "cute is a defense mechanism". That there are creatures in this world that need to be cute in order to stay alive. I agree with this, but I'd argue that there are different kinds of cute out there. There's the saccharine sugary stuff that makes your teeth hurt for a week. There's the instantaneous cute that is so mesmerizing you're actually afraid to look away. And then there's the quiet, understated cute that charms you with its intricacy and delicate wit. How's that for a segue, eh? Well, how else am I supposed to introduce to you what essentially boils down to one of the strangest and most delightful children's imports I've seen in a long long time? The Danes have been at it again. This time they've conjured up a fellow by the name of Toon Tellegen (why don't we ever name *our* kids "Toon"?) who for the last 25 years has written more than 300 stories about a little world full of animals. And so we end up with a book that feels like an old friend the first time you turn one of its pages. Like coming home again.

In *The Squirrel's Birthday and Other Parties*, Mr. Tellegen has written nine stories about the animal denizens of his little world and their various parties. In the first and longest of these a squirrel throws himself a birthday party and creates a huge array of delicious cakes for all the guests (a water cake for the dragonfly, an algae cake for the pike, a small moldy willow cake for a woodworm, etc.). Subsequent stories tell of other parties, both big and little. There is "The Set Table" where squirrel and ant stumble across a delicious table set up by a host so shy he won't reveal himself to his uninvited guests. Or "The Costume Party" where squirrel's gift for costuming proves to be his downfall, leading to an inspired solution. Each story is accompanied by a multitude of delightful little color illustrations. By the time you end, you'll sigh and wonder how it is that you no longer have any more stories to enjoy.

Back up, you. I'm going to generalize for a second here. Danish children's literature. Now now! I'm not saying anything bad about it! I just want to point out that sometimes Americans don't... well... don't exactly get it. Take the case of *The Swan's Child* by Dutch Cooper. I liked it and thought it was fun, but Americans got a little weirded out by this tale of a baby who appears on the back of a swan and is raised by a cadre of animals. We wonder why there aren't more foreign imports gracing our nation's shelves and the only answer I can give is that sometimes the books coming in have an entirely different flavor from our day-to-day fare. We Americans don't know how to handle this, so we reject `em en masse. So really, one of the most remarkable things about *The Squirrel's Birthday* is that though it feels different from the bulk of the schlock out there, it's infinitely relatable and lovely. Translator Martin Cleaver has done a stand up job at capturing the flavor of the writing. What could have come off as merely weird now feels like a contemporary successor to Milne's Pooh tales, more than anything else.

This is a safe world. As the Introduction says of its author, "He created a world where there is only one forest, one river, one ocean, and one oak tree." It's the kind of world small enough for a child to feel comfortable in. The animals would sooner eat their party hats than one another. Misunderstandings are few and far between, but that doesn't mean there isn't a lot of stuff going on. It just happens to be on a low-key level. One where the biggest fret in a day will be over whether or not you have made enough gigantic cakes for all your party guests.

For some of you the name "Ahlberg" will elicit sighs of comfort and respect. You may cast your mind back and find yourself thinking of Janet and Allen Ahlberg who brought into this world *The Jolly Postman* amongst other charming fare. Charm must be genetic then since it has trickled down into this, their daughter,

and through her into the illustrations for this book. Ahlberg spots Tellegen's tales with tiny pen and ink watercolored images. Infinite care is taken so that they enhance each storyline, never overwhelming it or distracting from it. They're like the chocolate chips in a cookie. Little bursts of sweetness that make you appreciate the final product all the more. You cannot read this book and understand how anyone but Ahlberg could have illustrated it. She is the E.H. Shepard of the 21st century.

In her art, Ahlberg takes as much care in what she does include as in what she doesn't. Snail's home (on his back) is akin to Snoopy's doghouse in those old *Peanuts* cartoons or Oscar the Grouch's garbage can. An infinite amount of space in a tiny package. In one story snail decides to renovate his shell with an extra floor and a balcony. The story is pretty silly but straightforward, so it's interesting to note that Ahlberg makes the executive decision not to show the finished shell at all. Instead she gets immensely coy. You see a branch from a tree next to a handsaw and a tool box. Turn the page and all the animals are at the bottom of the left-hand side while giraffe pokes his head from the right-hand side (presumably while standing on snail's new second floor off-camera, so to speak). At other times we read about impossible dance partners (a whale and a seagull?), and in each case Ahlberg finds a way to keep you intrigued without ever feeling cheated.

Are Tellegen's books too sophisticated for children? Rarely. A story about a grasshopper invited to a posh party who purchases a speck of dust "worth a fortune", does this so that he may enter the party and then carelessly brush the dust from his coat. A delicious cake appears, but with a note saying that the only person who eats it must be "someone who doesn't feel like cake." I hesitate to say that the stories bring to mind *The Little Prince* because I feel like they're more child-friendly than that, but there's certainly a similar mindset about children and the degree to which they can understand a story. I won't go crazy and say that this book is for all kids, but for some it will be a tiny treasure that some will choose to remember for years to come. *The Squirrel's Birthday and Other Parties* is the perfect way to introduce children to this already established author. Here's hoping we see far more of these books in the English language translated for our amusement. A jewel.

Ages 4-9

Margaret Behr says

I read this because it appeared on a list for young, strong readers. It was strange, whimsy, and delightful. My favorite story was the first one, "The Squirrel's Birthday." The others were a little odd and not entirely resolved, but that's part of the magic. I truly enjoyed this book because it reminded me of the magic in children's books.

Favorite quote(s):

Dear Whale,

I'm not sure if you exist, but I'm inviting you to my party anyway. Tomorrow, on the beach. If you exist, will you come?

The Seagull

Amanda says

This came so highly recommended, I think my expectations were a bit too high. It's enjoyable, and would make a very good read aloud for certain three- and four-year olds. As I read, I kept thinking to myself, "This is SO not American."

The best story is definitely The Costume Party.

Rebecca says

This small chapter book, a collection of animal stories by renowned Dutch author Toon Tellegen, reminds me in equal parts of Winnie-the-Pooh, the Beatrix Potter stories, and The Little Prince. It would be a great gift for a child or adult with that kind of spirit.

The story "A cake for someone who doesn't feel like cake" could possibly be a fun short puppet skit, with a little more of an ending added. These stories often seem to stop abruptly, on a philosophical note rather than a plot point, but maybe something is lost in the translation.

Adorable tiny pictures by Jessica Ahlberg sprinkle the text.

Favorite quote:

"One day, the squirrel was walking along the edge of the woods when he saw a cake standing among the lilacs."

Julie says

i liked it. It definitely had the feel of another culture. The author is Dutch and it came from bedtime stories he told his children. It felt a little odd, but mostly gentle and quirky and different. I enjoyed his descriptions very much. I'm glad I read it.

Karla Winick-Ford says

I loved this. Varied colors and texts- very visually appealing. I liked the vocabulary usage. Readability is great also. Very creative and perfect bedtime story collection for young children
Recommended

Amy says

We read both the Squirrel's Party book and the Letters to Anyone by Tellegen/Ahlberg. The illustrations! SO charming! I couldn't stop looking. The stories are quirky to our ears and we were pretty mystified at first. Many of the stories seem quite unresolved. But once we read a bit more, we got used to it and really started to like the stories. I would recommend reading the Letters book first because the bits are short. In the Squirrel Pary book the first story is pretty long and it ends in an unexpected way so you are pretty invested in

wanting an ending and you don't get one. Anyway - that is all to say I'd read these again though I don't think my daughter would request them again. I'd buy a book just based on those illustrations though.

flag

Deborah says

"Dear Whale,
I'm not sure if you exist, but I'm inviting you to my party anyway. Tomorrow, on the beach. If you exist, will you come?
The Seagull"

Poetically strange, delicate, delightful. Animals, dressing up, presents, and plenty of delicious cake - THE SQUIRREL'S BIRTHDAY AND OTHER PARTIES.

Tina Hoggatt says

A gentle, sweet series of stories for young readers from a Dutch author, featuring animals and insects, fish, whales and birds. There writing is sometimes a bit twee for me but the illustrations carried me along. Though the book is the perfect size for young hands to hold I found myself wishing for the book to be larger so I could see the illustrations in all their glory. In the mold of the Detective Gordon books but with an expanded cast of characters.

Green Bean says

The last thing Squirrel wants is a boring birthday, so he invites every furry, winged and finned creature he knows to his party, and they all RSVP, even Whale! The friends dance and snack and schmooze until glowworm is too sleepy to glow, and hippo starts to yawn. But never fear readers, the fun isn't over because this beginning chapter book is filled with festivals--a housewarming for snail, and a costume party with snakes disguised as mice, and elephants clad as butterflies!

Joan Gagan says

I was rather disappointed with this book. It reads simply and is very cute in its simplicity, but the plots of the stories are just plain odd. The first story about Squirrel's birthday goes on and on for nearly 70 pages and he never opens the presents. The next couple of stories end abruptly.

Sandra Stiles says

I know I am probably in the minority here but I rather enjoyed this little book. The illustrations were simple

and beautiful. The stories at times had to be re-read because they have been translated. The way the story is developed is so different from the way American writers write. I felt like I was sitting in a proper English school listening to a tale. Some of the words were definitely too difficult for younger children. My 8th graders didn't understand they writing because they seemed almost unfinished. Having said that let me say the following: My grand-daughter came to visit on the day I was reading this book. She will let me read anything to her, cereal boxes, menus, you get the idea. She popped up on the couch and asked me to read the story I was on "The Set Table". As I finished I prepared to talk to her about the story, she is only 3 1/2 years old. Before I could say anything she asked me if the dragonfly was shy? I asked her why she thought he was shy and she said, he didn't eat with the ant. Now I know that my grand-daughter is not like many. She has been using words like "plethora", etc. for over a year. But if she could get that from the one story it makes me wonder if all it takes is reading to our children from the time they are born and talking to them about the stories before they can even talk to give them the head start on books like this? I would give this book a 4 out of 5. I have a friend at school who reads things like this to her daughter and I will pass it on to her. I know she and her daughter will find it as charming as I did.

Vicki Riddiough says

A bit different than A Great And Complicated Adventure but I thought the stories made a little more sense; they are much longer, so not as ideal to get through an entire story before bedtime but my 8 yr old loved it, regardless.

Scott says

As with "Letter's to Anyone and Everyone," this book is a gem. My 6 and 3 year old girls loved it, but it is more than a children's book. It is somber and philosophical and delightful. And the accompanying illustrations are perfect, which highlights the rich poetic imagery such as cakes made of water, Night literally "strolling" along, and a whale and a seagull dancing at a heart-warming beach party. And it also contains the answer to the question: what is a speck of dust worth? The answer: A fortune! I love it!

Minh Nhân Nguyễn says

4 sao.

Vi? thây? ?a?nh gia? cao qua? va? ai cu?ng khen nên mi?nh mua vê? luôn ca? bô? 4 cuô?n rô?i m??i ?o?c :).
Va? ?o?c xong cuô?n ?âu tiên na?y m??i biê?t cuô?n sa?ch thiê?u nhi na?y ?u?ng la? đa?nh cho thiê?u nhi :).
Ho??c nh??ng ai co? tâm hô?n m? mô?ng nh? tre? th? m??i thây? thu? vi? khi ?o?c no?.

Ta?c gia? h??n cu?ng la? mô?t ng??i m? mô?ng nh? thê? m??i co? thê? nghi? ra nh??ng y? t??ng hê?t s??c
?a?ng yêu nh? trong sa?ch. Co?n gi? ?a?ng yêu nh? câu chuyê?n vê? chu? So?c viê?t th? m??i muông thu?
ê?n d?? sinh nhâ?t mi?nh, rô?i qua? tri?nh chuâ?n bi? v??i ?u? ca?c loa?i ba?nh đa?nh riêng cho t??ng loa?i
vâ?t ma? chi? co? trong tri? t??ng t??ng bay bô?ng cu?a tre? con.

Hay ?a?ng yêu h?n gâ?p bô?i la? buô?i tiê?c ho?a trang cu?a ca?c loa?i, n?i ma? chi? co? tri? t??ng t??ng
vô tâ?n cu?a bo?n tre? m??i co? thê? nghi? ra viê?c chuô?t chu?i ho?a trang tha?nh tôm hu?m, gâ?u

"cosplay" ca? sâ?u, hay h??u cao cô? vâ?n ca?c th?? "phu? tu?ng" gia? la?m thiên nga. Cô?ng h???ng v??i nh???ng y? t???ng tuyê?t v??i ?o? la? tranh minh ho?a ma?u qua? s??c ?a?ng yêu, không thể na?o h??p h?n ???c n??a.

Tuy nhiên ?ô?i t???ng cu?a cuô?n sa?ch na?y cu?ng chi? gi??i ha?n ?? l??a tuô?i thiê?u nhi, no? chi? gô?m nh???ng mậ?u chuyê?n ng??n va? rấ?t ng??n, g??i lên nh???ng y? t???ng ngô? nghi?nh, trong sa?ng ?ê? tre? con mang va?o giâ?c m? cu?a mi?nh nên kê?t thu?c mô?i truyê?n kha? cu?t, không dâ?n ?ê?n ?âu ca?. Nê?u ?ô?i ho?i nhiê?u h?n thể co? thể se? thâ?y thâ?t vo?ng khi ?o?c.

Chu? ?ê? cuô?n na?y n???m ?? t??a sa?ch: ca?c buô?i tiê?c t?ng b???ng ?? trong r???ng, la? cuô?n ?ậ?u tiên cu?a c??p ta?c gia? - ho?a si? na?y mi?nh ?o?c, va? no? cu?ng m?? ra ca?nh c??a ?ê?n vu?ng ?â?t v??a la? ky? v??a quen thuô?c ma? ?? ?o? ta thâ?y mi?nh nho? la?i nh? hô?i be? th?.
