

The essence of a story often gets lost when we translate it into English. This is not so for this journey into another realm, translated from Italian. This story charts the journey of the very last elf until he is truly found and in the process also finds himself. This story tells us about a creature who is the last of his kind, does not know how special he is and the characters who are touched by his presence over time.

It really is two stories, the first section of the book deals with the elf as a child and his perception of the world, the second half as an older elf and a greater understanding, yet still with that wide-eyed wonder with which he views the world.

There are parallels throughout the book with our current situations now in the world and throughout history. We see this little foundling trying to fit in and say the right thing, "No human liked elves. His Grandmother had always said so." The growth in understanding between Sarja, the hunter and Yorsh the elf is complex ... as they realize that they are more similar than they could have imagined. Their differences diminish and a growing respect and trust grows between them as they journey together. They begin to rely on each other for survival, and as demonstrated in the second half of the story, the gifts of kindness will be repaid over and over.

In a classroom situation some interesting discussion could develop over how 'different' doesn't necessarily mean 'bad' ... and times in history where cultures have been persecuted simply for being different to another culture. From a personal development point of view we get to see life from the 'loner's' perspective and that the majority or more powerful isn't always right.

In typical quest style we get good versus evil, weak versus strong and the importance of truth and reality. All qualities we hope are embraced by a younger generation and give them the inspiration to live their lives well.

The Last Elf by Silvana de Mari, is a welcome and tender example of a well written junior fantasy novel. The author manages to use the use of simple language to evoke pictures for the imagination to devour (unlike many fantasy novels where we can get lost within the endless descriptions that seem to go on forever and can easily lose a young audience). An enjoyable read for older children (late primary or early high school) and adults alike, with great messages on how to be the best person you can be.

Kim Barnes, Branxton Public School, NSW

This light hearted yet thoughtful fantasy is a delight to read. The characters are engaging. The elf embarks on a quest. On the way he encounters a prophecy that sends him, along with the man and woman who have befriended him, searching for the last dragon. The plot is interesting, and action filled.

Lengths of sentences are appropriate for young readers. The author uses humour throughout and uses it to great effect. Much of the humour is based on misunderstanding between the elf and the humans and others he encounters.

The elf's naïve attitude toward the troll and the effects of this encounter, which are otherwise than the reader anticipates, is achieved with a light hand and yet it could be used to highlight the point that others respond to us according to the way we treat them. Throughout the story, young readers will enjoy being smarter than the elf.

Teachers might use this book to teach children about nouns, or the use of similes and comparisons. On page 4 the young elf dreams of 'clothes soft as sparrows' wings and warm as duck down, the color of dawn, the color of the sea.' The book is alive with colour and action, yet also interesting reflection from the elf that will have the reader smiling. The text introduces children to irony.

In the hands of a resourceful teacher this book could easily lead into discussion and lessons about how to treat someone who looks different to you and has come from a different background. It would be a useful for teaching about discrimination and friendship as well as other life values, such as keeping promises, fear and its effects, love and hate, trust and mistrust, sharing,

generosity, selflessness as against selfishness, and sacrifice. The incident where the elf frees the baby dragon, regardless of the pain to himself in the process, is beautiful.

The author manages to convey in a humorous way, how actions have consequences that may not always be as we expect.

This is a book that offers hope, which is important in books for young readers. It also stresses the importance of story. *The Last Elf* plays on imagination and has a charm not easily defined.

There's a depth in the text that will bear re-reading. This book deserves to be a winner with children, teachers and parents.

Dale Harcombe, NSW

The Last Elf by Silvana De Mari is an engaging novel with a subtle depth of meaning on several levels. On one level it is a tale combining elements of fantasy and fable sprinkled with a fresh sense of humour. It tells the tale of the last elf forced from his home by incessant rain causing floods. He has never been in the 'outside world' although he has heard stories. This allows his character to interact with the world of humans and other creatures in an innocent and trusting way.

On his way he encounters a woman and her dog. Later, a hunter joins the little group. Together they accidentally discover a prophecy linking the last elf with the last dragon. The destiny of the last elf and the last dragon is to find a way to stop the rain and let the sun shine again on the land. On another level, the story is a philosophical questioning of attitudes and values held by humans. On the journey of discovery in search of the last dragon and fulfilment of the prophecy the elf encounters a tyrant whose greed and cruelty is completely alien to him. He also encounters other creatures that are a threat but the elf, unknowing, sees only positive aspects and thereby changes the way they view themselves and ultimately changes their behaviour.

The Last Elf is not only a well-told story; it is also a book that deals very subtly with powerful emotions. The elf discovers the effects of love and hatred, generosity and selfishness, wickedness and redemption. It is guaranteed to encourage the reader to think well past the storyline.

Margaret Warner (casual teacher/writer), NSW

The world has become a dark, wet depressing place. The little elf is sheltering from the rain, trying desperately to imagine a safe, dry happier place. A dog sniffs him out and chases him through the mud and it's almost all over when he trips on a tree root and falls flat on his face. Thinking he is about to be eaten by the dog that is standing over him, the elf is very relieved to hear a human voice say, "Leave him!"

Thus begins friendship with a woman and her dog. However it is not without its difficulties; a major one being communication. The elf is still wary of being eaten by the dog or the human and the elf's lack of understanding of idiomatic English leads to some hilarious dialogue in the story. A hunter joins them and the small party embarks on an adventure. They stumble on a prophecy in which the last elf must find the last dragon and together they must figure out a way to stop the rain and bring sunshine back to the world.

This book would appeal to nine to thirteen year olds, who enjoy a good story with humour, fantasy and adventure.

Nova Gibson, Summerland Primary School, New Zealand

In *The Last Elf* the reader quickly learns that little elf is on his own in a hostile environment. He only has the knowledge given to him by his grandmother and this doesn't help him in many of the situations he is to face. The best thing that happens to him is meeting a woman and a hunter. The meeting of the three sets them on the road to their destiny.

The book is divided into two parts. As the reader nears the end of part one and the story concludes you wonder what is to come next. Part two of the journey is just as exciting with tension built through each chapter.

The novel should be recommended to confident readers, as the complexity of the text and no illustrations means the reader needs to decipher all the nuances and information directly from the text. Without this understanding, much of the enjoyment of the book could be lost. Little elf has trouble with the human language. The reader enjoys the story fully when they understand the play on words and referential background.

Teachers could use this novel to teach persistence, resilience, friendship and confidence (a belief in oneself features strongly).

Roxanne Steenbergen, Claremont Primary School, TAS

The Last Elf by Silvana De Mari is well-crafted with a complex, page-turning storyline. A brilliant and original novel, let alone De Mari's first. Filled with a lot of action and emotion, *The Last Elf* quickly became of my favourite children's books.

I didn't want Yorsh's adventures to end; I loved his child-like innocence and his endearing sense of humour. He showed many human emotions and traits such as fastidiousness, discipline, vulnerability, love, grief and a healthy temper too. He had a deep sense of honour and responsibility most specifically displayed when he stayed to tend to the dragon for many years and then in turn, to rear its' baby.

I loved the hunter (Monser) and the woman (Sajra) who showed parental and an almost selfless concern for the young elf's welfare. The story of what happened to them and those around them was unexpected. In fact, De Mari's interpretation of humanity's tendency to ridicule, exclude and retaliate against those that are different was very real.

There really is too much in this book to do it justice with this review. From the first line, I was absorbed. The characters are rich, interesting and believable. I came to know each character well and did not want their stories to end. I hope there's a sequel.

A great read for ages 10 and up.

Julie Huntley, QLD