

The book, *Far, Far Away*, by Tom McNeal, introduces readers to the personality of the ghost of Jacob Grimm. Jacob is one of the brothers Grimm, famed for compiling dozens of fairy tales, both hopeful and dreadful. The main character, Jeremy Johnson Johnson, forges a friendship with this ghost whom only he can hear. This tale has all the components of a good fairytale, including an evil "finder of occasions" and three children who find themselves his prey. The heroes are as unlikely as the villain, but good is triumphant in the end.

The "dreadful" parts of the story can be disturbing as the children are slowly poisoned and eventually starved. They are held in a dungeon and are stranded in darkness while the villain plays recordings of scratching rats and screaming children. The villain burns the bodies of his victims and, in the end, commits suicide in the very furnace he has used for his evil purposes. Children who might be sensitive to this should be aware, but the evil is vanquished and good does triumph. Placing the dreadful, disturbing pieces of this story on display without the context of the characters, plot and the backdrop of a fairytale paints an inaccurate picture of the story, which uses the awful details to magnify evil and raise up hope. I could as easily tell you this is a story of hope where a girl's prayers are answered and it would be as true, but not the full picture.

The value of fairytales such as *Far, Far Away*, is their ability to help form the moral compass of children while confronting evil and grappling with it under imaginary circumstances. While parts of the story are certainly disturbing, they expose children to the reality of evil in a safe setting and give them voice to discuss and experience to understand the problem of evil. Parents should be aware of these issues and deal with each child accordingly. The important thing to note about *Far, Far Away* is not that it deals with a very awful evil; but that it presents an awful evil as evil, a rotten villain as bad and the heroes as good and virtuous, though sometimes misunderstood. So often children are presented with evil characters that are sort of heroes and heroines. The questions of evil in much modern literature is not tackled head on, but presented as somewhat gray. *Far, Far Away* does not present the problem of evil as ambiguous.

Beyond the value of developing the "moral imagination", *Far, Far Away* is an intriguing story with well developed, likeable characters and an engaging plot. I believe *Far, Far Away* is a good addition to our Level III list for its creativity, excellent writing, moral challenge and its entertainment value.