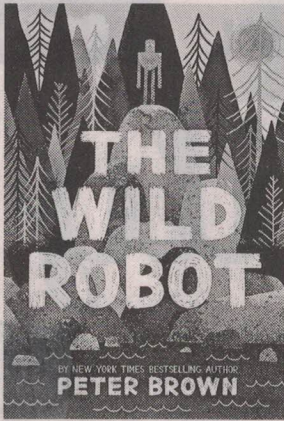




The Village School's Children's Book of the Month



Book reviewed by
George Bennett
(4th-6th grade teacher)

'The Wild Robot'
By Peter Brown

"The Wild Robot" is a charming and surprising book that I have found appeals to children from second grade upwards (probably as a read-aloud at that age) and adults alike. It begins with a hurricane and a sinking ship, and the only thing that survives the wreck intact is a crate that washes up on an island. Inside the crate is a robot, one of hundreds that the ship had been transporting. The crate is immediately investigated by a group of inquisitive sea otters, one of whom accidentally presses the button that activates the robot. 'Hello,' it says. "I am Rozzum unit 7134, but you may call me Roz.' And so begins an adventure in which Roz the robot learns to live among the wide assortment of wild animals on the island.

The otters, and all the other animals, first assume the humanoid robot is a monster and keep as far from her as possible, but Roz is a robot and, as the book points out, doesn't really have emotions, so she quietly goes about the business of learning to survive, without bothering about the animals.

Gradually, however, she learns that the animals all have their own methods of survival, and she sees that she can learn from them. By watching a stick insect, she learns to disguise herself as a plant-covered stump, and this allows her to observe the other animals without being noticed. She begins to learn their languages, based on careful, robotic concentration and the knowledge built into her programs.

Then she sees an opossum playing dead, to avoid being eaten by a badger, and the opossum teaches her that acting can also be a way to survive. So Roz decides to act in a friendly manner towards the other animals. This helps a little, but it's not until she takes care of an orphaned goose egg, and watches it hatch, that she really begins to connect to the island's inhabitants.

The newly hatched gosling thinks Roz is its mother and Roz, in turn, accepts the role, but knowing nothing about rearing a gosling, she asks for help from an old female goose. The goose introduces Roz to a family of beavers, who are impressed by Roz's willingness to rear the orphan and help her build a lodge for them both to live in.

As Roz learns more and more from the animals, she becomes more animal-like. She learns to speak to them, she develops feelings, and she comes to act as a mediator between them. With the help and example of the animals she learns to be 'wild' herself, and go beyond her original programming. This need for mutual cooperation forms one of the key strands in the book — without being preachy — while another important theme is that all the animals have something to teach Roz about survival.

One strong point in making this fantasy believable is that the animals continue to behave like animals. The fox and the owl pursue the smaller rodents, for example, and a pair of aggressive bears doesn't suddenly become cuddly. However, there is a daily truce, in which all the creatures can gather for an hour and discuss matters of mutual importance, and at these truces Roz gradually becomes accepted by the whole island. When disaster threatens first the animals, and then Roz herself, everyone works together to combat the dangers.

"The Wild Robot" is arranged in 80 very short chapters, which helps make it quite accessible to younger readers, though at the Village School we have also found that it appeals to 5th and 6th graders. If you're still looking for holiday gifts, look no further.