

Jack Outwits the Giants

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Recommended for ages: 3-7.

This adaptation of the classic fairytale puts the protagonist in a new setting: The Appalachians in the eastern United States. Here, Jack while on a walk with his dog, encounters a giant woman who offers him shelter to avoid the raging storm. The woman feeds him cornmeal and hot coffee and Jack is taken aback by the scale of everything in the house. The woman's husband then arrives, an even larger man with two heads. Immediately, the giant starts complaining about the food that she provides and notices that Jack might be tasty. The couple offers him their attic so that he can spend the night and Jack agrees. Overhearing their giant whispers, he realizes that they want to eat him and manages to hide while the giant bashes his sleeping pallet.

The next morning, the two are surprised to see Jack alive and there is some double-entendre as Jack mocks their efforts. Frustrated, the giant grabs Jack, but his woman protests and warns of the possibility of Jack being cursed. In a desire to figure out the truth and the hazard of eating him, the giants give him several tasks. The first one is the milking of 5 cows, but in the proximity of the house. Realizing that he cannot move the cows, Jack finds milkweed and fools the giants into thinking he is milking rocks.

The second task is carrying a giant bucket of water after filling it at the creek. Jack fools the giants again by offering to carry the whole creek. The woman, scared for her fields, tells him to stop.

The third task is the cutting of an enormous oak. Realizing that he cannot do it, Jack decides to lie, stating that he told the sheriff that he was being held against his will and that the sheriff is arriving with his posse. Scared, the woman convinces the giant to hide instead of fighting, Jack offers them a trade: since they fed him, he will hide them in the well and lie to the sheriff. The giants agree and climb into the bottomless well, Jack makes sounds simulating the arrival.

This adaptation is most striking because of its language, words like "mud-fence ugly" and "busted up chairs" are particular to the region and do a lot to change the flavour of the setting and the characters. The exploits, like those of the original Jack story, take a little departure from believability, especially the creek example, but the giants are faithful to the stereotype of stupidity. The thing that I liked about the characterization were the illustrations of the dress and of the landscape, which hold loyal to period Appalachian imagery that I have seen. The feel of the story, despite the violence and threat, is acceptable to children, particularly due to Jack's innocent appearance and his dog's presence in every illustration.

I would recommend this book, but would warn young readers that not all giants are as foolish as they are depicted, and that sometimes lies like the ones Jack says can backfire.

Recommended Readings:

Jack and the Beanstalk by Joseph Jacobs

The Big Over Easy by Jasper Fforde

How the Dragon Was Tricked by J. G. Von Hahn