

Review of the Day: *Waiting for Winter* by Sebastian Meschenmoser

By: Elizabeth Bird

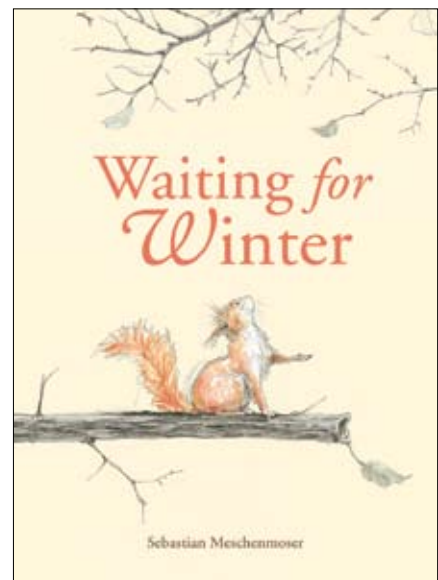
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Waiting for Winter

My reviewing process is very neat and orderly. As I read books I place them on my To Be Read shelf, where they are cataloged by those most likely to get a review to those least likely. Everything has its place. Some titles wait months before I get to them. But once in a great while, if I'm lucky, I run across a book so spectacular that I have to review it immediately. *Waiting for Winter* was that book. Now if I say the name Sebastian Meschenmoser to you, does it ring any bells? No? Well, the man first burst on the American scene with his touching if strange *Learning to Fly* about a penguin with flights of fancy. But *Waiting for Winter*, his latest title to be released here in the States, is far more accessible to the American market. It is smart, clever, beautifully illustrated, and downright funny. Each season there is one good "snow" book that comes out for kids. This book should be considered the good snow book of this and any other year. Read it!

Under normal circumstances, Squirrel tends to sleep through the winter. However, this year Squirrel has heard from Deer that it's going to snow soon. Squirrel has never seen it snow before so he commits himself to staying up to wait for it. When merely staying up doesn't work he runs like a madman to keep himself occupied. Such energy wakes up Hedgehog, who also has never seen snow before. To keep themselves open eyed they sing loud sea shanties which, in turn, wakes up Bear. Now all three animals are waiting for snow. But what if it has already fallen? Taking Deer's description of the element ("White and wet and cold and soft") each one finds an object that might be snow. But after looking at their toothbrush, tin can, and sock, a single snowflake falls to the ground and the three are left in a whirl of white. And after making a snow creature (to be discovered by a confused pair of humans later) the three can finally burrow down for a long, comfortable sleep.

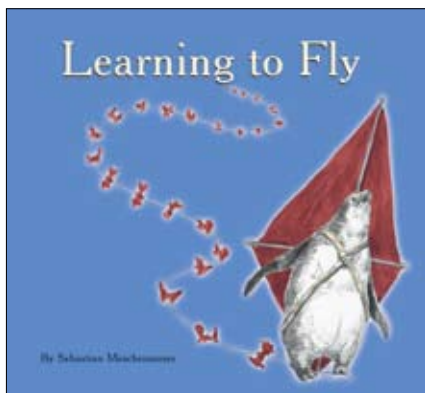


(H) 978-1-935279-04-4

\$15.99

From Germany

By Sebastian Meschenmoser



(H) 978-1-929132-39-5

\$8.95

From Germany

By Sebastian Meschenmoser

Meschenmoser's style is mesmerizing. Look at the lines closely and they just appear to be the hastily scrawled lines of a palsied hand. Back up a little and the lines come together and coalesce into not just recognizable characters, but sympathetic ones. After all, what human being doesn't identify with sleep deprivation? In this book various characters are so bleary-eyed and sleep starved that they look half dead on their feet. There's an absolutely wonderful close-up of the squirrel sitting on a branch, feet splayed. His fur looks like he just rolled out of bed and he's holding his tiny paw to his head as bags form under his eyes. This is one tired pookie. Facial expressions on realistic animals are also difficult, but when a seriously disgruntled bear hears Squirrel and Hedgehog's explanation for why they're being so loud, his skeptical look askance at the reader is priceless.

Pacing is so important too so the author doles out each image beautifully. The two-page wordless sequences sometimes act like silent comedies. For example, on the first page

Squirrel and Hedgehog are letting rip some sea shanties, on the second they continue to belt out the tunes, and on the third Hedgehog has launched into a particularly boisterous part (using a leaf for emphasis) while Squirrel notices the awake and grumpy bear standing nearby. Two of these three spreads are wordless, but Meschenmoser renders any need for explanation unnecessary. You get where he's coming from. The crazy thing too is that in spite of the fact that this is a translation, the writing reads aloud beautifully. There's a real wonder to the words here. So kudos to both Mr. Meschenmoser and his translator. One gets the impression that the feel of the original tale has been well preserved here.

The little details are wonderful as well. For example, Hedgehog initially walks into the story with a couple leaves haphazardly stuck to his spines. Near his tail is a nut of some sort. And while the leaves do eventually fall off in the course of the story, in the last image when he's curled on top of bear's rump, fast asleep, the nut and one of the leaves remain firmly ensconced on his own backside. Meschenmoser also knows how to use his endpapers properly. At the beginning of the book the front endpapers show a scene of birds flying south for the winter. And as for the back endpapers, they kind of give the book its final joke. Turn there and you'll see a snowy woods. Two men laden with firewood stand stare at a lopsided snow. . . bear? It must be. With its sock nose, tin can hat, and toothbrush pipe, the animals have also taken care to use sticks and branches to give it claws and a tail. Fabulous.

Great snow stories are hard. Sometimes I feel like other countries write better snow books than we do. Consider *Snow Day* by Komako Sakai and now Meschenmoser's title. What I like about this book is that the author/illustrator really knows how to make use of the subject. You don't want a snow book where the world looks exactly the same after a snowfall as it did before (albeit with the landscape white) do you? No! Snow changes more than just how the land looks. There's a kind of light that accompanies a snowfall. An eerie glow that comes only when the scant light from the sky reflects off of falling frozen particles. Meschenmoser plays off of this when he has the fake snowfall dream sequences of Hedgehog and Squirrel. When toothbrushes or cans are falling against a dramatic sky, it looks especially silly. Then, when the real snow comes down, the silliness is gone. The shot of the three animals making a snowbear has this ethereal blue light shining on the scene. Any artist thinking of making a picture book where snow falls at night should be required to pick up this book and examine it closely (alongside the aforementioned *Snow Day* and probably *Owl Moon* too) first.

The actual medium Meschenmoser is working in here isn't divulged on the publication page, but we can make some informed guesses. Graphite, certainly. And the orange of Squirrel, the green of some dying leaves, Hedgehog's yellow underbelly, the red of his berry, and Bear's brown highlights are all colored pencil. The only time you see any paint here is when the snow (in its myriad incarnations) comes down against the blue/black background that is the sky. That sky is painted, as are the flakes that fall. So suddenly you have a graphic world covered in thick blue and white paints. The result is that you really feel a kind of awe at the snowfall. It's special, and it makes everything it falls on special too.

The flaw? Because every picture book has to have one flaw, right? Okay, so the flaw of this book is so minor it's almost inconsequential but I figure I should bring it up just to be fair. I can't figure out if this is a problem on the part of the original manuscript or the translation, but the book begins with squirrel finding out about snow from a deer. But a quick glimpse at the accompanying picture and that animal squirrel is talking to? It ain't a deer. A goat, maybe. Though what a random goat is doing in the forest is anyone's guess. Maybe there are wild goats in the German trees. Or perhaps their deer are short and squat with ram-like horns. Dunno. In any case, feels like something got lost in translation along the way.

Meschenmoser is probably the best-known contemporary German picture book author/illustrator published in America today (which isn't saying much). Eric Carle doesn't count and you might be able to make a case for Ole Konnecke, but that's pushing it. Nope, like a latter day Janell Cannon Meschenmoser is our man and if ever there was a book of his deserving of our attention it is *Waiting for Winter*. Touching and funny by turns, this turns out to be not only an ideal winter tale, but also a perfect bedtime story too. For any kid who has ever tried to stay awake for an important event, this tale rings true. A must purchase. Can't talk it up enough.

