

TSUBU THE LITTLE SNAIL

Simon & Schuster; ISBN:0-671-87167-6; ages 4-8

Children's Literature (Barnes & Noble)

This book is a classic Japanese folktale, retold and accompanied by beautiful paintings. It is a welcome addition to multi-cultural folklore. This book tells a story of a man and his wife who long for a child. A little snail is treated like a child and fills the farmer and his wife with joy. Their love for him is rewarded. The author has researched Japanese folktales from early scholars to contemporary Japanese retellings.

BookList

In a retelling of a classic Japanese folktale, the Water God answers the prayers of a rice farmer and his wife for a baby, not with a child but with a "tsubu", a "little snail." Fast-forward 20 years. Wishing in some small way to repay his parents for their kindness, Tsubu takes the yearly rice tax to the powerful landowner and winds up marrying his daughter, whose unconditional love frees him from his shell and transforms him into a handsome young man. Children, who never seem to tire of this familiar plot, are given a glimpse into the Japanese culture in both text and art. An author's note describes how the message of the tale grew out of the beliefs of the Shinto religion, and Kiuchi's handsome oil paintings, depicting beautiful landscape scenes of the Japanese countryside, effectively transport us to an ancient Japanese village.

KIRKUS REVIEWS

A Japanese folktale about a rice farmer and his wife who pray to the Water God for a child, any child. He sends them a snail, which they raise as their son. After 20 years, the snail speaks, asking the now elderly farmer to allow him to take the horses with the rice tax to the choja who owns their fields. The choja is so impressed with the snail that he offers him one of his daughters as a wife. After she proves her unconditional love for him, he turns into a man.

Williams debuts with unhurried prose and polished, slightly elevated, language that is perfect for this Shintoist story, giving it depth. This is fully preserved in Kiuchi's atmospheric illustrations—full-fledged oil paintings. Almost without bright colors or smile (until the end), they have a powerful haunting effect, evoking Japanese vistas and moods without resorting to stylization. Sources are fully cited in an author's note.