

That Book Woman
by Heather Henson
pictures by David Small

My folks and me— (1)
we live way up
as up can get.
So high
we hardly sight
a soul—
'cept hawks
a-winging in the sky
and critters
hid among the trees.

My name is Cal, (2)
and I am not the first one
nor the least one neither.
But I am the oldest boy,
and I can help Pap
with the plowing
and I can fetch the sheep
when they take a-wander.

And I can bring the cow home too (3)
come evening-time,
which is right handy,
seeing as how
my sister Lark
would keep her nose
a-twixt the pages of a book
daybreak to dusky dark
if Mama would allow.
The readenest child
you ever did see—
that's what Pap says.

Not me. (4)
I was not born
to sit so stoney-still
a-staring at some chicken scratch.
And I do not fancy it one bit
when Lark plays Teacher—
the onliest school a jillion miles
back down the creek.
And even Lark can hardly
spread her wings and fly.
So now she aims
to school us herself.
But me, I am no scholar-boy.

That's why I am the first to hear (5)
the clippitty-clop
and spy the sorrel mare—
red as clay.
I am the first to know
the rider is not man at all,
but a lady wearing britches
for all the world to see.

'Course we make that stranger (6)
kindly welcome
and she's friendly as can be,
and after sips of sassy tea
she lays her saddlebag
upon the table
and what spills out
might just as well be
gold
the way Lark's eyes shine
penny-bright,
the way her hands
they won't keep still,
reaching out to grab
a treasure.

Now what that lady brings (7)
it's sure no treasure,
not to me,
but books!
Would you believe?
A passel of books she's packed
clear up the mountainside!
A hard day's ride
and all for naught,
I reckon.
For if she aims to sell her wares
just like the tinker-man
who travels 'round
with pots and pans
and such,
it's but a plain and simple fact,
we have not greenbacks here,
no shiny coins to spend.
Least-ways not
on dumb old books.

Well, Pap he takes one look at Lark (8)
and clears his throat.
"A trade," he says.
"A poke of berries
for one book."
My hands double fist
behind my back.
I yearn to speak,
but daren't
It is the very poke I picked—
for pie,
not books.

To my surprise (9)
that lady shakes her head
real firm.
She will not take
a poke of berries
not a mess of greens
nor any thing
Pap names to trade.
These books are free,
as free as air!
Not only that—
why, two weeks to the day
she'll come again
to swap these books
for more!

Now me, (10)
I do not care one hoot
for what that Book Woman
has carried 'round,
and it would not bother me
at all
if she forgot the way
back to our door.
But here she'll come
right through the rain
and fog
and cold.

That horse of hers (11)
sure must be brave,
I reckon.

Comes on a time (12)
the world turns white
as Grampap's beard.
The wind it shrieks
like bobcats do
deep inside the dark of night.
So here we sit
tucked 'round the fire,
no thought to howdy-do's this day.
Why, even critters of the wild
will keep a-hid
come snow like this.

But sakes alive— (13)
we hear a
tap tap tap
upon the window-glass.
And there she be—
wrapped tip to toe!
She makes her trade

right through the crack
to *us* folks
from catching cold.
And when Pap bids
her stay the night,
she only shakes her head.
“My horse will see me home,”
she says.

I stand a spell to watch (14)
that Book Woman
disappear.
And thoughts
they go a-swirling 'round
inside my head,
just like the whirly-flakes
outside my door.
It's not the horse alone
that's brave
I reckon,
but the rider, too.

And all at once (15)
I yearn to know
what makes that Book Woman
risk catching cold,
or worse.

I pick a book with words (16)
and pictures, too,
and hold it out.
“Teach me what it says.”
And Lark,
she does not laugh
or even tease,
but makes a place,
and quiet-like
we start to read.

Pap says it’s written (17)
in the signs
how long or short
the winter stays.
This year the signs
they all foretold
of deepest snow,
of cold eternal.
And even though
most days
we’re tight as toes
pinched into boughten shoes,
I do not mind.
A puzzlement,
I know, but true.

It’s nigh on spring (18)
before that Book Woman
can stop to visit a spell.
And Mama makes a gift—
the only precious thing she can—
her recipe for berry pie,
which is the best grub earthly.
“Not much, I know,
for all your trouble,”

Mama says,
and then her voice
goes low with pride,
“and for making
two readers outta one.”

I duck my head (19)
and wait until the very last
to speak my mind:
“Wish there was something
I could gift you too.”
That Book Woman
turns to look at me
with big dark eyes.
“Come here, Cal,”
she says real gentle,
and I come close.
“Read me something.”

I open up the book I’m holding, (20)
a new one brought
this very day.
Just chicken scratch,
I used to figure,
but now I see
what’s truly there,
and I read a little out.

“That’s gift enough,” (21)
she says,
and smiles so big,
it makes me smile
right back.