



### Meena

Written by Sine van Mol

Illustrated by Carianne Wijffels

2011, Eerdman

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Klaas, Christa, and Thomas are convinced that Meena, an older woman who lives on their street, is a toad-eating, blood-drinking witch. They fear her, and this fear fuels their imaginations as they create stories about her, taunt her from a distance, and even write “witch” on the sidewalk near her house. When they eventually see a little girl entering her house, they take action by creating warnings for the girl and sending a threat to Meena, thinking they are saving the girl’s life. Even as the young girl claims Meena is certainly not a witch but is her grandmother, they respond with doubt and are slow to accept the invitation to come closer and partake of Meena’s cherry pie. Despite the earlier childlike and abusive responses of the children, Meena treats them kindly, as a grandmother might be expected to act, and a friendship is seemingly formed at the story’s end. The universal childhood experience of creating stories in response to fear of the unknown is evident in this picture book. One doesn’t have to be from Belgium, the country of origin, to recognize the humorous, realistic experience of these children when their imaginations go awry. With a well-positioned lesson in the dangers of fear guided by prejudice, *Meena* is a book that holds connections for children globally.

Besides the similarities of childhood experiences across cultures, one also is reminded of the similarities of traditional tales, frequently those sharing the European tradition, that include the image of witches. And while the belief in witches enters the fantasy realm that is often considered outside discussions of authenticity, key to the authenticity of this book is the notion of childhood (or even adult) imaginations imposing stories and situations on local scenarios in hopes of creating an explanation for the unknown. Embedded in such mind play are universal themes of bullying, prejudice based on fear of the unknown, and the stereotypes given to elderly people who are perhaps different in how they appear, talk, and act. All these themes are easily identified in society.

*Meena’s* delightful illustrations are colorful and expressive depictions of the children and their bullying antics. Carianne Wijffels has used two different styles to tell this story. “When accentuating a character or object, Wijffels employs painted and cut paper, cheerful buttons, thread and other media in layered, compositions; the supporting roles are rendered in single-color outlines” (<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sine-van-mol/meena/>). Both humorous and emotionally packed, the images on each page are placed strategically on white background giving a postmodern emphasis to the children’s engaged emotions and the objects of their fear.

Both the author and illustrator of *Meena* live in Belgium. Sine van Mole has written several books for children since 1990 and has a special interest in children and the problems they face. Corianne Wijffels teaches art and has collaborated on two other books with van Mole in Dutch: *Emilio and Motje*. *Meena* was published in Belgium in 2010 and published in the US in 2011.

One theme that can be elaborated upon is that of relationships with the elderly, more specifically with grandparents. Paired with such books as *I Love Saturdays y domingos* (Alma Flor Ada, 2002), *Grandma's Records* (Eric Velasquez, 2001), or *My Nana and Me* (Irene Smalls, 2005), the varying relationships of children and the elderly provide a natural context for discussions about the value of such friendships. A focus on the theme of fear based on stereotypes and bullying might find this book paired alongside *Enemy Pie* (Derek Munson, 2000), *Say Something* (Peggy Moss, 2004), or *The Rag Coat* (Lauren Mills, 1991).

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