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BOOK REVIEW

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Bagley Loves Bridget

By Karen Brailsford

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THE WAINSCOTT WEASEL

By Tor Seidler.

Illustrated by Fred Marcellino.

194 pp. New York: Michael Di Capua Books/HarperCollins Publishers.

\$20.(Ages 5 and up)

ON the South Fork of Long Island live the Wainscott weasels, whose busy and social lives inform Tor Seidler's marvelous new novel. It's just possible that not since a spider named Charlotte saved a pig named Wilbur from the slaughterhouse has there been a more tender tale of interspecies love and devotion. Mr. Seidler is never heavy-handed in the lessons he

teaches, but infuses his text with a warmth, a subtlety and a humor that are reflected in Fred Marcellino's accompanying illustrations.

Mr. Seidler and Mr. Marcellino previously collaborated on "A Rat's Tale," a fine urban story. Here the setting is rural. Bagley Brown Jr., the title character of "The Wainscott Weasel," cuts a dashing figure on the jacket cover as he looks out from behind a black patch that covers one eye. But he is actually a reticent and sensitive soul who bears the burden of a legacy. His father, for whom he is named, was the engineer of the Double B, the tunnel that runs the quarter-mile from the edge of the woods to a farmer's chicken coop, enabling the weasels in Wainscott to subsist on eggs.

Bagley's reclusive nature makes him a natural target for conjecture. No one knows that his patch is not an affectation, that in fact he lost an eye to the same large bird that murdered his father. But all is revealed after our hero becomes embroiled in the book's two major story lines -- and begins to take part in the goings-on in his community.

One story involves Zeke, a hot-tempered weasel, who is pursuing Wendy, a maddeningly flirtatious and indecisive newcomer, who in turn has a crush on Bagley. (She emerges, thankfully, as a fine feminist character, putting to rest this reader's initial fears.) The second plot line turns on Bagley's love for Bridget, a fish with "dazzling eyes and glorious greenish stripes," whose life is threatened by the giant osprey that lurks above the pond.

THERE are other dangers in Wainscott, though given the weasels' life style -- they work very little, dance a lot and speak a slang peppered with phrases like "get hitched up" -- one would think they didn't have any cares. Formerly a

sleepy spot, Wainscott has become less paradisiacal as a result of human encroachment. Farms and fields are shrinking, summer homes proliferating. At one point Zeke says of the arrogant humans: "I swear, if they weren't such big monsters, they wouldn't last 10 minutes."

There's no doubt, however, that these weasels will last, as they band together in an effort that earns Bagley honor, shows ingenuity and respects the osprey's predatory nature. Alas, Bagley doesn't get the girl -- fish and weasels just don't mix. Yet this most heroic weasel is both stoic and noble as he accepts this reality. In the book's touching final passage, Bagley recalls an intimate moment with his gilled love: "As the last purplish glow died in the west, a cool sea breeze swept over the dunes and across the potato field and touched his face, bringing back Bridget's kiss. . . . But he refused to feel sorry for himself anymore. For, in a way, that kiss was sort of like the firefly. . . . It was enough to light Bagley's way home in the dark."

It's as if Tor Seidler is prodding young readers to find their own way home to tolerance and cooperation with the environment -- and with themselves.

Karen Brailsford is Articles Editor at Elle magazine.

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