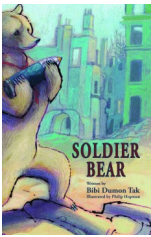


Soldier Bear



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We librarian types tend to pay a lot of attention to award-winning books, although we can't deny we're often a little disappointed when our personal favorites don't win. The Mildred L. Batchelder award is given each year by the ALA's Association for Library Service to Children. "...to the most outstanding children's book originally published in a language other than English in a country other than the United States, and subsequently translated into English for publication in the United States."

This year, the Batchelder was awarded to a book that has just become one of my own favorites - **Soldier Bear**, written by Bibi Dumon Tak, illustrated by Philip Hopman, and translated from the original Dutch by Laura Watkinson. A fictionalized account of true events that occurred in World War II, this is the story of a malnourished Syrian brown bear cub sold by an equally malnourished young boy to a group of Polish soldiers stationed in Iran. The soldiers nursed the bear back to health, and in the process, the bear, which they named Voytek (or in Polish, Wojtek, meaning "smiling warrior") became their good, if mischievous, friend and mascot. Voytek provided love, laughs, and practical assistance to his human companions even during the worst of times, while causing them no end of (mostly humorous) headaches. He became so popular, even with officers, that he was made the official mascot of his unit - and his caretakers were surprised when one officer had a company seal created, memorializing the day that Voytek helped the soldiers pass artillery shells! Voytek, who was officially declared a private in the army, also picked up a few bad habits from his fellow soldiers, such as drinking beer and smoking cigarettes - although in the latter case, he actually ate the lit cigarettes, preferring them to unlit ones. Children ages 9 and up will enjoy this unusual, funny, poignant tale, and adults will eat it up!

Posted by Ellen A. on April 11, 2012

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