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The Firekeeper's Son

Irene Halliday

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Park, Linda Sue. *The Firekeeper's Son*. Illustrated by Downing, Julie. Clarion Books, 2004. ISBN 0618133372. \$16.00. 40 pp.

Reviewer: Irene Halliday

Reading Level: Primary; Intermediate;

Rating: Excellent

Genre: Historical fiction;

Subject: Signals and signaling--Juvenile Fiction; Fire--Juvenile Fiction; Korea--History--19th century--Juvenile Fiction; Books--Reviews;

Sang-hee lives in an important coastal village in 19th century Korea. "Our part of Korea is like a dragon with many humps," his father says. "The humps are the mountains--the first hump facing the sea, the last hump facing the king's palace. Our mountain is the first hump. Our fire is the first fire." Sang-hee's father must climb the mountain every evening and light the first signal fire, so that the other firekeepers may light their fires to notify the king that all is well in the land. Yet, as he plays with his army of toy soldiers, Sang-hee wishes that just once, the fires would not be lit so the king would know there was trouble in the land and send his tall, brave soldiers with shining swords. When evening comes, Sang-hee glances at the mountain. No fire. His father is late. He continues his chores, checking the mountain often. Still no fire. He finally calls his mother, who sends him up the mountain path to see what is wrong. Sang-hee finds his father groaning with a broken ankle at the side of the path, unable to walk. Sang-hee must carry the heavy brass pot with the live coals and tongs up to the mountain top and light the fire. Once there, he is tempted to leave the fire unlit so the soldiers will come and he can see them and talk to them. However, he makes the right choice and lights the fire, imagining a great battle in the flames as they mount to consume the brush. Until his father's ankle heals, Sang-hee is the keeper of the first fire in Korea.

Short, poetic sentences in a flowing, folk-like style will be understood and enjoyed by early to middle elementary age children. Skillful watercolor and pastel illustrations bring a softness to the village and the mountain trek as evening advances. The contrast of the brightly glowing flames of Sang-hee's fire to the twilight purples are a visual as well as imaginative treat, perfectly complementing the text. Though useful as an illustration of Korean village life and culture, the more powerful theme of personal responsibility in making decisions that affect others emerges naturally from a simple, yet powerful story.