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### The little gentleman

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Pearce, Philippa. *The Little Gentleman*. Illustrated by Tom Pohrt. Greenwillow, 2004. ISBN 0060731613. \$16.89. 200 pp.

Reviewer: Irene Halliday

Reading Level: Intermediate

Rating: Excellent

Genre: Fantasy fiction;

Subject: Old age--Juvenile fiction; England--Juvenile fiction; Grandparent and child--Juvenile fiction; Moles (Animals)--Juvenile fiction; Magic--Juvenile fiction; Friendship--Juvenile fiction; Book--Reviews;

Life for Elizabeth, called Bet, is filled with sameness. As a result of her parents' divorce, when not at school, Bet lives with her grandparents, the Allum's. Mrs. Allum housecleans for old Mr. Franklin, who is laid up with a broken leg, and often brings Bet along to help. When Mr. Franklin asks Bet to go out to the meadow, sit on a particular log, and read aloud from a book about earthworms Mrs. Allum decides he is "cracked in the head." But Bet, happy to do something that isn't housework, feels unusually free and happy. Her first reading excursion doesn't produce Mr. Franklin's desired result, but the next one does. Bet is astounded when a mole surfaces, listens, and initiates a conversation with her. Over the weeks, mutual trust develops and their friendship deepens to the point that the mole shares with Bet his lifetime of adventures spanning hundreds of years. For a normal mole, such longevity would be impossible, but due to some 18th century Scottish witchcraft, this mole's life has been extended indefinitely; and later, eating magic herbs gives him the gift of speech, memory and untapped powers which he and Bet gradually discover. Bet suspects he even has the ability to shrink her to his size, allowing her to explore his underground world. Will he do it?

But the mole isn't happy. He doesn't want to be enchanted; he just wants to be all mole, not part mole with some human abilities. Bet knows she can help him, but is she willing to give up his friendship and allow him to be all mole and free of enchantment?

What child hasn't wished that a pet could talk to her? What interesting secrets a dog or a cat or a bird or a hamster could share! This entertaining book allows such an exciting thing to happen in a very natural way. But it can be enjoyed on a deeper level. As the story progresses the benefits of a true friendship surface. The ability and willingness of a real friend to help in a way that may cause personal pain is beautifully but naturally portrayed with satisfying results. Simple pencil drawings at the beginning of each chapter enhance the text and further stimulate the imagination. The British setting, with its occasionally different vocabulary, will not be a problem for young American readers; it greatly adds to the story's charm. References to historical events and mole behavior may make this book useful in social studies or science units. Children in grades 3-6 will discover the delights of a magical friendship in this well-written, imaginative story.