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Me and the Pumpkin Queen

Sandra L. Tidwell

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Reviewer: Sandra L. Tidwell
Reading Level: Primary; Intermediate
Rating: Outstanding
Genre: Contemporary Realistic Fiction;
Subject: Pumpkin--Juvenile fiction; Single-parent families--Juvenile fiction; Grief--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

Every year pumpkins weighing in at over 1,000 pounds are showcased at Circleville Ohio's Pumpkin Show. When Mildred's mother was in high school, she was Queen of the Pumpkin Show and wore a beautiful crown as she rode on a float during the parade. The fall after her mother dies of cancer, Mildred visits the pumpkin festival with her father and learns that her mother had always wanted to grow a giant pumpkin. Mildred decides that she will try to grow one because her mother no longer can. Over the years, Mildred continually fails to achieve her goal. Now that Mildred is 11, she is determined that this year she will grow the winning pumpkin. She discovers from Grover Fernhart, the local expert on growing huge pumpkins, which brand of seeds to plant. Although Mr. Fernhart discourages Mildred from even trying, he tells her to buy Howard Dill's Atlantic Giant pumpkin seeds. Along with Mr. Fernhart, Mildred's Aunt Arlene refrains from offering any encouragement. She thinks Mildred's interest in growing pumpkins is abnormal. However, Jacob, a class mate who becomes Mildred's best friend, is always there to help. Readers and story characters discover the laborious process of preparing, planting, watching, weeding, pollinating, measuring, and culling (or cutting off) pumpkins from the vine. When a crack appears on the surface of her biggest pumpkin, Mildred fears that again her dream will not be realized. Mildred conquers this last challenge and excitedly enters her giant in the Pumpkin Show.

In Kennedy’s debut novel about growing up and making friends, Mildred has an amazing family support system, and finds out even her Aunt Arlene is very enthusiastic about her achievement. Mildred's relationship with her father is realistic and supportive. In the process of planting and tending her pumpkins, Mildred develops empathy for others and experiences another phase of healing after her mother's death. Children will enjoy the short succinct chapters, and they will learn a lot about pumpkin growing, too. Consider omitting the few expressions of profanity (they did not need to be there at all!) for a great read-aloud book. Keep the jacket cover: Marla Frazee's artwork depicting Mildred dreaming of success as she watches a pumpkin grow will help draw readers to this enjoyable story.