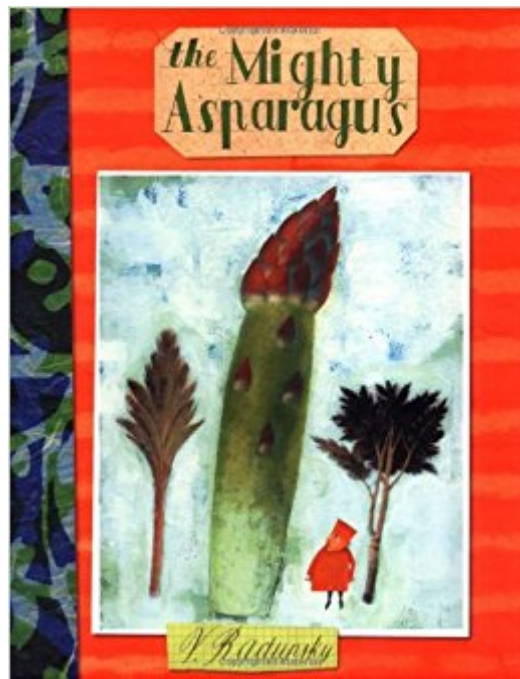




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The Mighty Asparagus (New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books (Awards))



Synopsis

Long ago in Italy, a mighty asparagus grew smack-dab in front of the king's castle. Was the king happy about it? No. The asparagus had to go. But how does a king reason with an asparagus of such stature? With tongue planted firmly in cheek, Vladimir Radunsky tells the uproarious tale of an almost immovable vegetable. Drawing on Italian Renaissance art, the esteemed artist creates a breathtaking magical kingdom, where it's easy to imagine that such an asparagus existed. His artwork is as gorgeous as it is funny. Although the old masters may turn over in their graves, readers of all ages will clamor for more of *The Mighty Asparagus*.

Book Information

Series: New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Books (Awards)

Hardcover: 34 pages

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Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

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Age Range: 5 - 9 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

Customer Reviews

Grade 1-6 — For those who love Radunsky's flamboyantly ribald sense of humor, are comfortable with chaos, and accepting of Italian Renaissance art delivered out of context and edited mischievously, this variant of the classic tale "The Turnip" is great fun. It is set in Italy in 1602, the year an enormous stalk of asparagus grew in the king's yard. A combined effort by the monarch, the queen, a rhinoceros, the bravest knight, the princess, and Tiny Little Bird succeeds in dislodging it. "And the humongous, stupendous, splendid, catastrophic vegetable collapsed!" Not much in the text or illustrations makes sense but both scream for attention. The old masters might not be pleased

with Radunsky's schoolboy tendency to exaggerate their subjects' noses or white out their eye sockets to fill them in with slightly crossed bug eyes. Part of the book's mischief involves a seemingly mindless inclusion of phallic images. Adolescent? Oh yeah. And no wonder, considering that the artist says he was 13 years old in 1602 according to the book-jacket notes. It's all very amusing, but will children get it? Yes! The lowbrow humor, the blind silliness, and the quirky exaggerations are childishness itself. For older children there is the appeal of random sarcasm and funky, distorted illustrations. —Liza Graybill, Worcester Public Library, MA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Gr. 4-7. Interpretations of the Russian folktale "The Enormous Turnip" (see Tatiana Zunshine's book, p.1622), are legion, but Radunsky's may elicit some furrowed brows. A giant asparagus appears in the courtyard of a king, who despises it; eventually, a small bird succeeds in toppling it after all others fail. The book concludes with a foldout revealing the veggie behemoth surrounded by characters and their elegiac musings ("Such a huge asparagus it was, and now it's fallen and beaten down"). Readers older than the story's usual picture-book-age audience will probably most appreciate Radunsky's gonzo storytelling style, but the text is really just a vehicle for eye-popping visuals, a pastiche of Italian Renaissance people and other elements nicked from actual paintings. An author's note acknowledges artists such as Lorenzetti, Piero della Francesca, and Mantegna, but, unfortunately, no master list is given for the numerous individual paintings that are referenced. Creative educators might make this flaw into a virtue, though, by encouraging students to use library resources to trace Radunsky's inspirations. Younger groups studying folktales should stick with retellings like Jan Peck's *The Giant Carrot* (1998); pull this out for sophisticated older kids (and college-age art students), who will get the most out of the armchair museum tour. Jennifer Mattson Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

DUMB BOOK! Pointless and not redeeming at all. 2004 NYTIMES standards must have been very low that year!

Brilliant artwork and story line, written as an off shoot of the well-known turnip tale. Radunsky has written and illustrated dozens of books, but this is the most complex and brings us into the world of Italian art of pre-Renaissance and Renaissance times. Adults will chuckle at the side comments he makes, as he delivers the story line. A must-have for any educator or family who loves and collects picture books.

Radunsky tops himself here with illustrations featuring Italian renaissance art, total whimsy and a classic good 'ole Turnip story turned Asparagus (how very Italian, I guess). Your kid and you will both enjoy this artful book.

Prior to this book, Radunsky was probably best known for his illustrated children's books (picture and otherwise) and his insipid, "What Does Peace Feel Like?" of 2003. Nothing, in short, that set him apart from the pack of children's illustrators everywhere. Then he got an idea. He decided to create a picture book much in the style of such ribald and witty artists as Jon Scieszka and former partner Chris Raschka. A picture book that strains at the edges of convention. In short, a crazy amalgamation of classic Italian portraiture, the old Giant Turnip turned asparagus tale, and some mixed media for spice. The result is a book that may not always work in the ways Radunsky may have wanted it to, but at least it takes a gamble on being a little different. Other picture books should be so brave. If you know the story of the giant turnip, then this tale will come to you as little surprise. One day the king is walking around his backyard when he spies a gigantic asparagus, fully grown, standing in the middle of things. Everyone admits that it is amazing, but the king is determined to remove it forthwith. Says he, "It sticks out like a sore thumb". No amount of pulling or tugging so much as budes the vegetable, however. His wife, the queen, finds the asparagus to be a beautiful sight. Her wish is to place it in the center of the palace but both she and the king are unable to move it. Add on the princess, the bravest the knight in the kingdom, and a mighty rhinoceros, but for all these the asparagus remains. Finally the king consults his mother and she sends a single tiny bird, who brings the tasty green tall thing crashing down. The moral, hidden amongst a lot of jabbering by the king's subjects, boils down to, "Even the smallest effort counts". End of tale. It doesn't sound that weird, does it? Sounds pretty darn typical. Then you get a gander at the illustrations. Radunsky usually goes in for crazy original drawings. Here however he seems to have taken a page from Terry Gilliam's book. Characters, places, and things are all culled from classic Renaissance paintings, then given extra eyes, crazy noses, and sometimes entirely original faces. This haphazard conglomeration combines to produce a mighty weird tale. Then there are Radunsky's words in and of themselves. A fan of writing in script and saying things like the fact that he himself was born in 1589 and "became a participant in, the heroic battle of the Mighty Asparagus (March 1, 1602)". It's possibly the first picture I've ever seen made specifically for children that had honest-to-goodness footnotes in it. There are also a lot of fun throwaway lines here mixed within the story. Honestly, I haven't a clue if kids will like this story. Adults certainly will, though the sheer scale

of silliness will keep it from being universally beloved. For originality, however, it's hard to beat. A fun if somewhat haphazard tale.

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