



## The Silver Donkey

By Sonya Hartnett

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**The Silver Donkey** By Sonya Hartnett

**From extraordinary novelist Sonya Hartnett comes a gently told fable of a lost soldier, heroic children, and a steadfast donkey.**

One morning in the woods of World War I France, two young sisters stumble upon an astonishing find — a soldier, temporarily blinded by war, who has walked away from battle longing to see his gravely ill younger brother. Soon the care of the soldier becomes the girls' preoccupation, but it's not just the secret they share that emboldens them to steal food and other comforting items for the man. They are fascinated by what he holds in his hand — a tiny silver donkey. As the girls and their brother devise a plan for the soldier's safe passage home, he repays them by telling four wondrous tales about the humble donkey — from the legend of Bethlehem to a myth of India, from a story of rescue in war to a tale of family close to the soldier's heart. Sonya Hartnett explores rich new territory in this inspiring tale of kindness, loyalty, and courage.

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### Editorial Review

#### From School Library Journal

Grade 4-6—A lieutenant walks away from a battle in France during World War I. Tired of the fighting and unable to see, he wants to return home to England. Two French sisters living near the English Channel find him and provide him with food and other supplies. The girls quickly realize that caring for the soldier is more than they can handle and involve their brother and his friend. As the days pass and the boys work on a plan to help the man across the channel, the soldier shows the children a small good-luck charm in the shape of a donkey. During the course of the book, he tells them four tales about the creature, the first one being a version of the Christmas Story. Gradually, readers learn that the soldier is not blind, but that he has closed his eyes to the violence around him. This is a charming book in many ways. In spite of its setting, it's a gentle story that introspective readers will find satisfying.—*Jane G. Connor, South Carolina State Library, Columbia*

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#### From Booklist

The language and evocative pencil pictures shine in this quiet tale of World War I with other stories nestled inside it. Marcelle and her little sister, Coco, find a soldier in the woods near their home. He cannot see; he is very hungry, and he wants to go home across the Channel. The girls spirit food out of the house for him: bread, jam, hard-boiled eggs. Each day he spins them a story evolving from the tiny silver donkey he holds in his hand. There's the donkey that carried Mary to Bethlehem when she was great with child; the donkey that prevented a monsoon; and the donkey that transported injured soldiers from the front. Then there's the explanation of the silver donkey itself, found by the soldier's small brother. The girls enlist their older brother, Pascal, to help the soldier, whose vision slowly clears as the fog of war recedes. There's some didacticism here, but it's softened by the story's extreme gentleness and the sweetness of its ending.

*GraceAnne DeCandido*

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#### Review

"Who's there?" cried the man, and then repeated it in a language that the sisters understood. "Qui est là? Who's there?"

He looked toward Marcelle and Coco and must have seen two skinny, flash-eyed little girls, wild as kittens born under stables, the taller dressed in her brother's hand-me-downs, the smaller rumpled as a street urchin—but then he looked to the moldery soil and up into the trees, and behind himself toward the distant sea. . . . He scrambled backward in the dirt, covering his knees in mud. "Who is there?" he asked again.

Marcelle and Coco stared. . . . "It's just us," said Marcelle. "No one else."

The man stopped scrabbling and became very still. . . . "I can't see you," he said nervously. "I'm blind. Who are you?"

. . . The girls, emboldened, peered more closely at their discovery, stepping from the shadows like fawns. They saw that the man had untidy brown hair and that his face was rather dirty. Coco, who had a sparrow's quick eyes, saw that he held something silver and enticing in his palm, something that twinkled and gleamed. . . . "I'm Marcelle," she told him. "I'm ten. This is my sister, Coco. She's eight. Her real name is Thérèse, but everybody calls her Coco."

... "Are you a soldier?" asked Coco unexpectedly.

The man hunkered against the tree. "Why do you ask that?"

"Well, you are a bit like a soldier. You have a soldier's blanket and a soldiers' boots. And once there were soldiers who slept a night in our village and they spoke in a funny way, the same way you do."

"It's called an accent," said Marcelle with superiority.

The man was fidgeting, casting his blind gaze about. The fascinating silver thing remained closed in his hand, gleamy as a fishhook, hidden as a jewel. He said, "I am a soldier - well, I used to be. I'm not one anymore."

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