

Malvarina

Author:

Susanna Isern

Reader:

Miriam Tobin

This is a charming, engaging and enjoyable book for children of seven or eight years old. Malvarina the nine-year-old protagonist narrates the story in the first-person, directly addressing her readers and daring them to read on if they aren't too scared. Her story is set in the gloomy town of Villagrís (Greyville) on the edge of the Enchanted Forest which legend has it swallowed up an adventurous boy named Tristán fifty years ago and he was never seen again. In the centre of the town lies the Forbidden Castle where three wicked witches – the triplets Clío, Cornelia and Musgo – live and rule cruelly over the people. The village elders say that many years ago a kind Marquess used to live in the castle and at that time the town was full of life and colour. Everything changed and turned dark when the three witches took power.

Malvarina tells her readers that the witches are known for their evil laughter, terrifying spells and long noses with which they can smell frightened children from miles away. When there's a full moon the witches leave their castle to fly around town on their broomsticks, casting spells on everyone that they see: the baker's daughter was turned into a strawberry cupcake and the postman became a letter box. Now everyone stays locked up in their houses in fear. No one had approached the Forbidden Castle for many years until one night a little girl paid the witches a visit. That girl was Malvarina herself, she exclaims to the reader. She had always been fascinated by the witches and was desperate to meet them. That night she was feeling brave and rang the castle doorbell.

The witches were more terrifying than she had imagined. She told them she wanted to be a witch too and while at first they threatened to turn her into ice, they decided it might be useful to have an heir, and invited her into the spooky castle full of spiders and bats. After sleeping the night on a bed as hard as stone, the next morning a bird delivered Malvarina a list of all the things she had to learn or acquire to become a witch: evil laughter, black cat, magic potions, flying on a broomstick, witch fashion, and a final test – to cast a magic spell. Throughout her classes that day she never quite managed to master things in a conventionally witchy way: her laugh was too cute and quiet; she scared away all the black cats when she sneezed and so adopted a purple rabbit instead; the flying broomstick hurt her backside so she took up a flying carpet Aladdin-style; her magic potion was rainbow coloured and delicious-smelling; and rather than choosing a black witchy outfit, she claimed a beautiful, shiny, purple dress.

Now she was ready for her big moment; it was time to cast a magic spell. The three witches watched her fly off on her magic carpet with Lila the rabbit and her multi-coloured potion towards the Enchanted Forest. She searched for something to put a spell on and came across an ogre washing himself in a lake. He told her his feet smelt like cheese and his armpits like sardines and none of the children in the village would play with him. It was Malvarina's lucky day – her magic potion was in fact a magic perfume and she told him to drink it. Once the ogre swallowed the potion a gust of wind blew a cloud of purple glitter over him and when it cleared, the ogre was gone and in his place was a boy! He said he had always been a boy and didn't know how he'd become an ogre. Malvarina had an idea and asked him if his name was Tristán, the legendary boy who was swallowed up by the Enchanted Forest many years ago. Yes, he said and she told him he'd once been friends with her grandmother.

When the sun rose Malvarina and Tristán returned to the Forbidden Castle. Malvarina was delighted to tell the witches that she had successfully cast a spell and now they could officially make her a witch. They shook their heads and told her they'd decided she wasn't a good heir: all she had done was undo the spell they'd put on Tristán years before. Spells were supposed to be evil! She wasn't a wicked witch, just a bad one. They threatened to turn Malvarina and Tristán into rats and started uttering a spell, but Tristán had a secret weapon from his days as an ogre. He let out a rip-roaring fart that smelt so bad the bats flew away in fright and the witches fell to the floor. Malvarina and her new friend jumped on the magic carpet and flew out through the window.

Malvarina couldn't leave without her very own magic wand and so before they went back to the village, she and Tristán stopped at the Talking Tree in the castle gardens. The tree allowed her to break off a stick of wood to use as a wand, but meanwhile the witches had managed to catch up on their broomsticks. Malvarina had to do something before they cast a spell on them. Suddenly a series of strange words came out of her mouth and a light sparked from her new wand and sped towards the witches. The beam of light formed a huge soap bubble that encased and trapped the triplets, allowing Malvarina and Tristán to jump on the carpet and fly back to Villagrís. As they arrived home all the neighbours came running out of their houses. It's Malvarina, they cried, but she wasn't the same as before: she was returning as a real witch! That was just the beginning, she says, setting up the successive titles in the series to follow.

Malvarina is an endearing and spirited narrator whose sense of fun brightens the darkness of the story and its setting. She manages to approach all her witchy tasks in a unique way and become her own distinct brand of witch. The writing is bright and witty, zipping along in a lively manner and the message that it's ok to do things your own way is certainly a lovely one. Her narrative voice is perfectly pitched and creates a sense of collusion with readers who she addresses directly with little asides, tempting them to look through the keyhole into illustrations of the secret laboratory, for example. The effect of this narrative voice is to successfully appeal to children's sense of adventure and encourage them to be brave and join her on this journey. The accompanying illustrations are fun and characterful, depicting the distinct appearances of the three witches, the castle's intricate interior with labels to point out all its features, and the various comic moments in Malvarina's education to become a witch. There are also tender touches such as the introductory image of Malvarina herself which includes a label indicating her fear which she's hiding inside. There is plenty to look at, explore and enjoy for readers in the target age group.

The author Susana Isern has published a number of children's titles in translation and the sparky voice and humour of this story grant it international appeal. However, the subject matter of witches is well-worn in children's literature and it's therefore tricky to stand out in this arena. My concern for UK publication would be that there are many beloved books in English exploring unconventional or quirky witches such as *Winnie the Witch* by Valerie Thomas and Korky Paul or *The Worst Witch* by Jill Murphy, and despite Malvarina's charm, it perhaps isn't hugely original. Nevertheless, this is an endearing and entertaining story with a delightfully sassy narrator and were it to be translated, I can see it becoming a firm family favourite among a UK readership. There are no obvious translation difficulties apart from a number of puns and names which play on Spanish words, yet these allusions or similar ones would find their forms in English with a creative translation approach.