A Paso de tortuga
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This prelapsarian fantasy for children tells how, “in the beginning, animals and humans lived together in the same village”, danced together at fiestas and got along swimmingly. But humans began to think they were better, which led to tortoise calling an assembly, where he and others criticise mistreatment and the fact humans are now carnivorous.

The problem is political: animals need, as suggested by a wise hare, to confer with the Council of Elders. But said council is entirely made up of humans. Nonetheless the animals meet three of the Elders. The elephant is joined by the lion and the elephant. The meeting takes place under the Tree of the Word. Humans are found to be arrogant and set in their ways. Animals decide to abandon the village.

The new problem is: humans have fire and the animals miss the hot soups and stews.

The boa (here not the source of evil/sin but only of knowledge), who has never lived with humans, gives them advice on what to eat – but the advice never gets back to the mass of animals as each messenger (elephant, hare, giraffe, etc) who is sent stumbles on their mission.

The tortoise goes, approaches the whole operation at his customary slow pace, embraces the boa “for two years” and then goes back, enjoying a three-month siesta en route. The advice gets back safely and the animals live in harmony with nature, eating herbs and leaves and fruits.

From then on, the tortoise is recognised “as the wisest animal and, in some African cultures, is considered a goddess”. She saved the animal kingdom, after all.

This is a short (19-page) biblically inflected celebration of slow living, vegetarianism, and patience for young readers; the intended audience is age 6-7 or for parents to read to younger children.

There is no connection to the realities of nature in tooth and claw and no doubt young learners would have 100s of questions about the story’s fantastical elements.

The drawings are glorious, really beautiful – they might even work without words. The animals look wise and thoughtful. The text is simple and clear, full of refrains and cheeky dialogue. I’m not sure the message fully chimes with the environmental and climate issues school age children are already tackling. Anthropomorphism already feels a bit dated and while it sustains a great body of literature, the notion of “Eden” being a village is specious. The message of ecologists is not that humans and animals rubbed along together once upon a time but that humans left space for animals and then they didn’t – hence the crisis we now face.

This is essentially an otiose Animal Farm minus the tension, twists or irony and the promotion of a tortoise is Aesop all over again.

Beautiful to look at but whimsical to read/hear. The three journeys are the only action/movement and probably not enough to hold up the story.

In a competitive market I can’t really see At Tortoise’s Pace breaking through and succeeding in English. It is not hugely exciting or original and the message is a mishmash without a clear ideology or moral stance