***My thoughts and reactions to what I am reading.***

The Giraffe

*By Mauro Senesi*

The giraffe entered our town in the morning and looked at us all from high above. It had been brought along to attract a crowd by one of those men who set themselves up in the squares to sell razor blades. It was taller than the steeple, seen in perspective, but its eyes seemed close to us just the same, and rosy and good like stars at dawn.

Not only the children fell under a spell watching it, but we boys too; even the men and the women at first. It was the most extraordinary thing ever seen in our square. Slowly it would lower its head, then raise it again to a dizzying height. It must have seen over the houses, the clotted red roofs and the horizon. Who knows how far.

We boys made faces at it from below and shouted dirty words as if it were a girl with a long neck; it was only a way of distinguishing ourselves from the children, who admired it with their mouths wide open, but inside we felt still more excitement than they did. By now we had discovered everything in our world; we knew the alleys, the houses of the town one by one, and the people, the words, the seasons, the days always the same:

a reality full of limits that now the giraffe extended easily. We felt we were in Africa just to see it.

Every minute we had free—Flavio, Agosrino, Boddo, the others and I—there we were in the square, making a circle around it. The peddler said, "Will you come and buy my blades?" But our beards hadn't grown yet enough for us to need them.

All at once we saw the man's face turn red and then white, we saw him fall to the ground and lie there, still. The giraffe swung its head down slowly and kept it low, immobile over him. Soon after, the doctor arrived and said, "He's dead, just like that."

When they had taken him away, the giraffe raised its head again in the middle of the square. It moved its jaws, and its eyes had suddenly become attentive. The people standing around said, "Poor animal, what will we do with it?"

No one knew, not even the policeman, and it was then that Rolandino jumped out and said, "I'll keep it until someone comes to get it."

*What will you do with it, Rolandino, with a giraffe?*

Rolandino was a stubby boy, couldn't even reach high enough to touch its belly, so of course the people standing there

had to laugh, but we boys told him, "We'll help you, or else it'll eat you alive."

Rolandino took it by the halter and we pushed it from behind, because at first it didn't want to budge. The people asked us, "Where will you take it? What will you do with it?"

*What will we do with it, boys, with a giraffe?*

At last it moved and from then on gently followed us. It was lovely and new, leading it through our narrow streets. The roofs couldn't imprison that high head, and it seemed they took on another aspect and we ourselves had another look about us too. It was as if the giraffe were our periscope, **to** see from up above who knows what, who knows where.

Meanwhile, we studied every spot on his skin, every movement of its delicate muscles, its every expression. By the time we were done, it seemed we had built it with our own hands.

A thing pure and agile amid the stumpy, blackened shapes **of** the houses; even the girls seemed homely in comparison, standing still at their doors, and you could tell by their eyes how much they would have liked to come along after us. Whereas the old women crossed themselves as if it were a wild beast, our giraffe.

We didn't know what to give it to eat, but it took care of that itself, denuding the trees the Mayor had planted in a little square to camouflage it as a public park. A giraffe, certainly, is more important than leaves (anyway the winter would have eaten them), and yet everyone put up a fuss, even to calling the policeman who came and said, "If you don't take it away, I'll kill it with my revolver."

Then it began to get dark and the eyes of our giraffe gradually grew larger and almost bloody, and we led it close to other people on purpose to give them a fright. Even most of the men, besides the old women, didn't know right then and there whether giraffes are fierce or not.

Rolandino especially was happy when the giraffe—letting its head droop low—made someone go running. It was a kind of revenge for him, so tiny and used to having to run away from everyone else. He felt tall and free, escaped from reality, when he had that absurd wonderful animal close by, as for that matter all of us did, even though we kept pretending we had taken it up as a game.

The darkness became so thick it swallowed up the giraffe's head, which was taller still than the street lamps; there remained only its gray and slender legs dancing among us, over the stones. For a while, we continued wandering through the town, by now deserted. Our town went to bed early nights. We took the giraffe in front of the windows, so that its head looked in from outside. No one had been expecting it, that glance, in the privacy of their

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homes, and cries of fear or of shame were heard. Who knows what our giraffe had discovered?

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When all the shutters had been closed with a bang, a tremor seemed to pass down the animal's long legs. Rolandino said, "He's cold, he's used to the sun of Africa. Where can we find a place for him to sleep?"

There wasn't a house or a stall high enough for it and we didn't know what to do. The cold came from every part of the horizon, squeezing us together into a tight circle. The giraffe's skin was icy as a stone and all at once we seemed to have a monument before us.

A funny giraffe monument pierces slender and long into the sky. What shall we do with it?

Rolandino had an idea and said, "It'd fit in the church."

We felt dismayed for a second, but then one of us said, "I'll go and rob the key from the sexton." Another said, "God will certainly be happy to have it as a guest."

It took some doing to make it lower its head enough—and it wasn't much—to enter the church. Then we had to light a candle or two and the giraffe looked smaller to us but its shadow immense over the nave. Motionless it remained all night in front of the altar while we dozed here and there among the pews and the confessionals. By morning, however, it had eaten the roses, the carnations, the lilies, the chrysanthemums, and the candles, too.

It was then that the little old women dressed in black arrived for the first Mass and they began to shout, to cry, to pray. The giraffe, frightened, withdrew to the front of the church, placing its head right next to that of Jesus.

The priest arrived from the sacristy and at first buried his hands in his red hair but then we thought we saw him smile, even though he charged us to take that beast immediately out of the House of God.

The town had awakened early that morning; we found the square full of people who were angry with us and our giraffe, the woman on account of the profaned church and the men perhaps on account of its glances at them through their windows the night before, sudden, merciless, and divine. But there must have been other reasons, too, for the people's hatred; like the defense of an equilibrium, of a reality we wanted to subvert with our giraffe. So many reasons there must have been, but we boys couldn't understand, we knew only they had matured in a single night, like poisonous mushrooms.

Even the Mayor was there and furious because of his lovely little trees, now bare. He said, "We'll have to kill the giraffe." Everyone agreed. "If they kill it, boys. shall we start the revolution?"

Luckily, Rolandino had another idea. He began to run, "all ofa sudden, pulling the giraffe behind him. The Mayor and me people moved aside. We other boys slipped into the gap he had

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opened, without giving heed to our mothers and our bosses who were calling us, because it was time to return to everyday life.

Out of the square and beyond the town we ran, behind the sinuous giraffe, to look for hayfields. Soon we were moving in harmony with it, a magical lightness in our limbs until panting we stopped in a field on the side of a hill and Rolandino said happily, "We've made it."

Among ourselves we pretended it was a game, whereas it wasn't. We set to work pulling hay from the earth with our hands and the farmers looked at us grimly from the threshing floor but they didn't have the courage to come out. Who knows whether they're fierce, those giraffes?

Meanwhile we made plans for getting it back in the town thinking of ways to force it on the Mayor and the people. Livio said, "We could build it a house next to the town walls and put a fence around it, make a zoo."

Rolandino said the giraffe had to stay free.

But our talk was useless, and it was slow, for we knew we were defeated. And the giraffe knew it, too; we held the hay up but it didn't want any. It kept its head high and immobile on its stiffened neck; its eyes had an opaque, anemic red in them, like the stars when they're on the point of dying out.

Rolandino said, "It's the cold, or maybe those leaves it ate have hurt it somehow." There were tears in his voice.

Our giraffe stood still, its head piercing the sky. We called it in vain, we punched it with sticks and climbed on one another's shoulders to carry the sweet-smelling hay to its mouth, which it didn't open.

Slowly, then, it folded its legs. Its neck alone remained erect for an instant, before flowing to the ground with a long desperate sob. Its eyes were at our feet and they were spent, solid, and smooth, like those of marble statues.

Our giraffe had died by itself, boys, there was no need for them to kill it. Dam this town anyway, where giraffes can't live, because there's room only for the things that are already here.

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**Possible Questions for *The Giraffe***

1. In this story, the characters make a decision. What were their choices? Give specific examples from the story. Explain why they make the choice they make.
2. Choose one of the following quotations from the story. Explain what you think the quotation means about the characters in the story.

a. It was lovely and new, leading it through the narrow streets. The roofs couldn't imprison that high head, and it seemed they took on another aspect and we ourselves had another look about us too.

b. Our giraffe had died by itself, boys, there was no need for them to kill it. Damn this town/anyway, where giraffes couldn't live, because there's room only for the/things that are already there.

c. We other boys slipped into the gap he had opened, without giving heed to our mothers and our bosses calling us, because it was time to return to everyday life.

1. With which character or event in the story can you most closely relate? When have you or someone you know needed to make a similar decision or been able to make a similar realization? Use examples of the specific actions, reactions or feelings of one of the story's characters *and* connect them to your experience.
2. How good do you think this story is? What qualities does it have that make it effective? Give specific examples to support your evaluation.