

Child in the Wilderness

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Jasmin, Jan Truss. New York, Atheneum, 1982. 196 pp. \$10.95 hard-cover. ISBN 0-698-50228-1.

Jan Truss, author of *A Very Small Rebellion* and *Bird at the Window*, has written another fine book for older children. *Jasmin* is a moving and superbly written story about a twelve-year-old girl who runs away from the pressures of home and school: "the too-much homework, the too-many children, the ruined science project, and the certainty of failing her grade at school", she puts it as she blurts out her story to a friendly couple who eventually find her. In *Jasmin*'s story other girls between the ages of ten and thirteen can recognize their own problems: the need for privacy and independence; the irksomeness of responsibilities for younger siblings; the mounting pressures of schoolwork; the need to succeed. This is partly a problem novel, but it is more than that. In *A Very Small Rebellion* Truss moved back and forth between history and the contemporary world of her child protagonists as the children become immersed in producing and acting a play on the life of Louis Riel. In the new novel the child is educated about natural history in somewhat the same fashion. The child lives briefly in another world, a forest, and the reader is invited to imaginatively follow her. This imaginative element is enhanced by the writer's evocative descriptions of the Canadian wilderness.

Jasmin, eldest child in a large family, lives in a pioneer school house in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Her rebellion is triggered by a series of events which are making life unbearable for her. Because the chaos of her family life and her responsibilities as eldest child prevent her from doing well at school, she is going to fail grade six. When she comes home from school one day to discover that the science project she has worked on with great care has been ruined by her younger brothers, this is the last straw. She will be the only one in her class without a science project in the science fair. Inspired by Meg Merrilies in Keats' poem, she gets up in the middle of the night and runs away to live "as she did please" in the outdoors by herself. Living in the wilds, of course, turns out to be much more uncomfortable and dangerous in reality than the poet's version might lead one to believe. *Jasmin* needs to be "brave as Margaret Queen" indeed. She has not even reached the edge of her father's property before she is startled by the eyes of circling coyotes shining in the dark, and she must muster up enough courage to continue her escape. As she ventures deeper into the forest, she faces further fears and dangers, summed up in a frightening encounter with a bear. But *Jasmin* is a courageous and determined

girl. She finds herself a hidden house in a disused animal lair and during the next few days she hides out from the adults who search for her and learns to survive in the wilds. In doing so she finds hidden skills and hidden strengths.

Part of the book's charm lies in the detailed and keenly observed descriptions of forest life. The detail which comes from an obvious love of the natural world not only makes the book interesting as nature writing *per se*, but is also very evocative. Truss is particularly successful in conveying the sudden and often dangerous changes in mood in nature. While Jasmin lives in her lair, hiding from the adults who are searching for her, she becomes like the animals she lives amongst; like them she must keep an eye out for predators, and like them she must forage in the forest for such food as she can find. In fact, in one scene a police helicopter hovering overhead seems like a bird of prey as the child crouches down low and still, imitating a hunted animal hiding from its pursuers. Jasmin resembles the wily hunted animals of C.G.D. Roberts' stories as she fights to elude her adult pursuers and retain her freedom and independence. The sense of danger in the forest adds tension to Jasmin's flight. Truss tactfully makes her young readers aware of the grim realities of death and cruelty in nature, while allowing her heroine to cope and remain unscathed. The child comes to grip with these realities by molding them in clay. She sculpts a series of animal scenes: the bear that scared her, a frightened porcupine, one of nature's more timid animals, and a majestic moose she had observed unseen. During the days she is alone in her hideout she turns each significant experience she has in the forest into a clay model.

The story switches back and forth between the adventures of Jasmin, the reactions of her family, and the adventures of her retarded brother, Leroy, who becomes lost while trying to find her and has his own adventures. Truss creates this child with great skill and tact. Leroy is unable to express himself except through a series of grunts. He is particularly close to his eldest sister and follows her everywhere. When she disappears he alone realizes she has gone and feels particularly guilty because he is partially responsible for the destruction of her science project. Using dramatic irony the author allows her readers to experience the retarded child's frustration as he tries to explain to his uncomprehending family what has happened:

Leroy kept trying to tell them that Jasmin had gone because he had hurt her plants. He waved his arms excitedly, harsh noises bursting out instead of words. He struggled when they tried to push those pills into his mouth, those pills that took his thoughts away. He fought until Bud pinned him down on the floor, pushed two pills into his mouth and held his nose until he had to swallow.

The setting is contemporary; Truss creates very credible characters and describes a very real natural world, but the novel operates at an im-

aginative as well as at a realistic level. Storybooks abound with children who escape to fairytale worlds and return thence with secret confidence and knowledge. Jasmin has much in common with such children. The forest is not a fairytale world, but it is set apart and some of the things that Jasmin witnesses seem almost magical. Adults enter only as intruders and the heroine, living in her secret lair, seems almost transformed into an animal. The beginning of Jasmin's adventure has a fairytale ring. She has discovered a book of poems in an old cupboard:

In pioneer days the attic had been the teacher's bedroom, and in that small cupboard there were some faded, long-ago teacher's books. Most kids would think she was crazy for counting a dingy cupboard as a precious secret . . . She felt sure it had once been somebody else's long-ago treasure. On the inside cover in spiky, sloping, faded brown handwriting it simply said, *For Meg, 1894*.

In the book is Keats' poem "Meg Merrilies", which Jasmin acts out as she runs away to "live as she did please". The little, long-ago book sends the child off to a special world from which she returns enriched in imaginative understanding.

I think most young girls will agree that the story ends very satisfactorily. Jasmin is finally rescued by a naturalist and his artist wife. They find the child's animal sculptures, recognize her talents and with their help she organizes a project for the science fair, incorporating the sculptures she has made into a miniature habitat. To her surprise she wins a prize, and she is the only one in her school to do so. The recognition accorded her new-found skill for sculpturing and the social success which comes with this are not her only triumphs. In the art section of the fair is a portrait the artist has painted of her as she looked during her stay in the wilds. Jasmin struggles to keep back tears as she sees herself depicted walking, like Meg Merrilies in the poem, brave and proud as a queen, and I am sure girls of 10-13 years old who read the book will too. They will enjoy the suspense of the girl's adventures and they will recognize their own growing pains in Jasmin's malaise. Jasmin's adventures in the wilds may be remote from the experience of city children, but the writer's skill allows them to recognize in her struggles their own desire for independence and their own search for self-confidence.

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