

A Novel that Defies Categorization as a Children's Book

Willow and Twig. Jean Little. Viking, 2000. 227 pp. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-88856-7.

When cold, harsh, and sometimes brutal, reality batters innocent children, the results are almost always disastrous. Sometimes determination, a belief in love and the hope that it can be reciprocated allow an abandoned child to cope with day to day reality and to protect his/her best-loved possession. Willow Wind Jones is such a child. The world Willow inhabits for the years between four and ten will be unreal to most of Jean Little's young readers, even those who may have found themselves in abusive situations. Nonetheless aspects of her story such as the drug addiction of her mother, Angel, a native Canadian raised by adoptive white parents, who had Willow at age sixteen and then left her with Gram for the first four years of her life, will resonate with some children who have experienced life in a single parent family, or abandonment.

At the age of six Willow is presented with her brother Twig literally at the moment of his birth, and he becomes hers to mother, defend and teach until his fourth birthday. Twig is Willow's best loved possession. The children's existence has been anything but normal. Willow has seen Angel's boyfriends come and go, and Twig's father Julius, a West Indian, abandons Angel as soon as he hears she is pregnant. Angel gets assistance from two female friends, Jo and Lou who live in a camp up north, and it is there that Twig is born. They care for Twig and Willow after Angel abandons them shortly after Twig's birth, and teach Willow through correspondence courses. Even this place is not a safe haven, though, for a brother of one of the friends, in a fit of anger, strikes Twig on the head until he loses consciousness. Willow cowers under a table afraid to come to Twig's rescue. As a result, Twig loses his hearing and is believed to be "crazy" by most people who encounter him. The women find Angel and return the children to her, but in a few months she deposits them with another friend for a weekend and leaves them for three months. This sixty-year-old friend, Maisie, is ill, living in one room, on welfare, and can scarcely feed herself let alone Angel's kids. She dies and Willow watches Rae, a junkie, take her welfare check. Maisie has warned Willow about Rae, the man who introduced her mother to drugs, and Willow knows what his promise to look after her and Twig will mean. She decides to run with Twig who as yet cannot speak and has terrible tantrums. They have only the inadequate clothing they are wearing, and the envelope Maisie gave Willow from their mother. Willow ends up in a police station, the last place any of the people or street kids she knows would want to go to for help.

Opening the envelope from Maisie marks the beginning of a new era in the children's lives. In it are Grandmother's name and address. A helpful policeman, a kind social worker who just happens to have been involved with Angel when she was in trouble with the law and begged to be allowed to keep her children, and Angel's brother, Uncle Star, are all instrumental in advancing the fairy-tale plot. Within twenty-four hours life has changed completely for Willow and Twig. Gram and her brother Humphrey welcome them with open arms. Red Mouse, the character inside Willow's head who has kept her going since she was four years old speaks, much to Willow's surprise, with the voice of Gram's brother, a blind author of children's books who told the story of Red Mouse to Willow as a child, thereby

arming her against the cruel and harsh reality that she so often has had to face.

Many of the above graphic details occur in the first twenty pages of the novel, but we get to know more about this extraordinary ten-year-old child and her brother through flashbacks, as Willow works out her anxieties in internal dialogue with Red Mouse, or in comments to Gram and others including her new friend Sabrina Marr. It is always difficult for Willow to decide how much of the past to tell Sabrina, and the inner voice of her imaginary Red Mouse often gives her the strength and courage to relate aspects of that past life that she is ashamed of. What she ultimately learns is that a lot of children lead difficult lives and feel deprived of love for one reason or another.

Willow's responsibilities and her knowledge of the world her mother inhabits have made her old before her time, but she is also a child and vulnerable, craving love and a place to belong. Willow was nurtured and loved by Gram during the four years she lived with her and Uncle Hum, and she has recollections of some of the special times once she comes to Stonecrop, the Gordon family home. It is there that love works its magic. The major part of the novel treats Willow's and Twig's adjustments to their new life. Gram finds it difficult to start mothering again, and Willow is reluctant to give up any of the nurturing of Twig that she has done for four years. Uncle Humphrey acts as a buffer in the household that is somewhat of a menagerie with four dogs, a cat, and difficult Aunt Con. The children help unify the household in the end and sweeten even the frightened and sour Aunt Con, through offering her friendship and understanding in a time of crisis.

What is the audience for this heart-wrenching story of children at the mercy of negligent and sometimes uncaring adults? The voice of the narrator, ten-year-old Willow Jones, seems too sophisticated and worldly wise, too in tune with the manners and values of past generations. She is essentially in charge of her four-year-old brother Twig, and is terrified that no one will want him. She is also concerned about being dirty, having torn and worn out ill-fitting clothes, looking 100 percent native, having strange names, and about her and Twig not looking like brother and sister. She thinks no one else sees that he is deaf, and she has designed flash card pictures to practise words and phrases when she is alone with him. She is the only one who can hold and calm him when he has a tantrum. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the narrative is Little's excessive use of coincidence and extreme case scenarios. Sometimes they serve to hinder our "willing suspension of disbelief," and we fail to be convinced that this could be a true story.

Once the children arrive at Stonecrop, the narrative turns into a "rationalized fairy tale," a phrase sometimes used to designate the genre of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Little's text makes many references to children's classics, and she intermingles genres as many children's writers do. Her evocation of aspects of time-slip fantasy with Willow's belief that she may have seen the ghost of Elspet Gordon, the daughter of the early owners of Stonecrop, strikes me as an excuse to alert readers to the fact that they may read Elspet's story in Little's *The Belonging Place* (1997), reviewed in CCL No. 93. Uncle Hum and Gram make available Elspet's manuscript to Willow on her eleventh birthday, and Gram says "I think you and Elspet Mary have a lot in common" (168).

Willow may identify with Elspet, but to what extent will a ten-year-old

reader identify or sympathize with Willow and Twig? I read the book three times, but the worry continually nagging at the back of my mind is who will come to enjoy and love this book? I asked a number of teachers whether they thought the seven- to twelve-year-old age group would be troubled by the starkness of Willow's life in Vancouver's drug-ridden east end, and whether parents will want their children exposed to such explicit details about life lived on the street; they thought it should be for an older readership. My feeling is that Little has tried to weave too many threads of the problem novel genre for adolescents into her story, as well as interspersing the difficulties that adults face in establishing personal relationships founded on mutual understanding.

My final criticism is that although this novel is clearly intended for children, it may appeal even more to adults. If children read the book, parents should follow suit, and discuss with them some of the harsh realities many children in modern society face. The story of Willow and Twig, one hopes, is an extreme case scenario. That young readers can supply the fairy tale ending "and they all lived happily ever after," will at least be of some consolation to them. The sub-text of the novel will be more disturbing and leave a lasting impression on the adult reader. Gram's explanation to Willow of why her mother never felt she could bring Willow back to Stonecrop says it best: "I'm afraid we parted in anger, which is why she didn't bring you back when she clearly should have done so. I told her that children weren't parcels to be left until called for. I said if she took you, it must be for keeps. Me and my big mouth. My lecture kept me from seeing you until now" (66).

Some graduate students working with me on heroines in children's novels read *Willow and Twig* and loved it. They had no qualms about giving this book to the eight- to twelve-year olds for whom it is being marketed. In this novel Jean Little is definitely breaking what is for her new ground. She is also writing in part from personal experience. Little revealed autobiographical aspects of this novel at a plenary talk she gave in Toronto last summer as part of the Children's Literature New England (CLNE) Conference. She and her sister Pat Devries adopted two mixed-race children rescued from the Vancouver drug world. The adoption process and the welcoming of these children into the family, together with all the adapting that entailed, form the backdrop for Willow and Twig's amazing story. *Willow and Twig* has won the twelfth Mr. Christie Award in the best-books for middle-readers (ages 8-11) category. It was also short-listed for the CLA Children's Book of the Year Award. Jean Little has once again shown how "stars come out within" for those children whom we help to lead a happier life.

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