

A Thread of Light, A Bit of Sky

Blue True Dream of Sky. Meredy Maynard. Polestar, 1997. 131 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-896095-23-2.

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

e.e. cummings

Fourteen-year-old Nicola (Nickie) Angel awakens to rain and a pervading sense of loss that has oppressed her since the car accident that left her sixteen-year-old brother Calvin in a coma, her mother emotionally crippled, and her father the ruins of a once-happy family. The joy that rings through the cummings poem that gives the story its title will only be discovered through a series of events that bring Nickie's life into new focus as she struggles to reconcile conflicting values and to find her own piece of blue sky. Maynard has done a very skilful job of describing the evolution of a young teen's thoughts and emotions without for a moment suggesting that the outcome represents either the restoration of an idyllic past or a future without clouds and conflict. The journey from rain to a patch of blue sky is, Nickie comes to realize, not forever, but rather the essence of life, a journey that she will take again and again. "She thinks about following her heart and doing what she knows is right" and asks herself "Will it always be a difficult and dangerous and ultimately beautiful thing to do?"

The story is remarkably rich, both in the interplay of the elements of the plot and in the symbolism that it draws from the natural landscape, from Nickie's albinism (with its accompanying poor vision and sensitivity to sunlight), and above all from the characters who manage to be perfectly human at the same time as they represent the conflicts that divide friends, family and community. Primary among these is Calvin, whose thoughts as he struggles to come back into the world are a counterpoint to Nickie's actions.

The central public conflict of the story, between the loggers of Weldon Sound and the environmentalists who would protect the old-growth forest from them, is also the family conflict that caused Calvin to fling himself out of the house on the night of the accident after a quarrel with his father over the evils of logging. And it's the conflict that brings Nickie together with her new friend Jeff, one of the "tree-huggers" from the city, and separates her temporarily from her best friend, Alyssa. Yet out of this conflict comes Nickie's new-found ability to recognize the complexity of such problems and to rediscover the joy of using her talents to try to bring about change in the world, even when the objective seems hopeless. Music, which had once been part of the joy of her life, has been abandoned in despair after Calvin's accident — but when it is presented as a way of reaching him, it becomes a restorative for Nickie as well. Similarly, the talent for climbing trees that she had abandoned with her childhood becomes an avenue for expressing her love for the forest and for Calvin and a vehicle for opposing the logging company at the same time as it becomes a means of

reconciliation with her logger father. For Nickie, self-discovery is at the same time discovery of others and of other points of view and, perhaps most important of all, the discovery that it is part of the human condition to hold conflicting points of view at the same time. The Nickie who takes the risk of offending her father by warning the environmentalists about the logging company's plans is the same Nickie who defends the loggers against those who want to save the trees but use the wood and paper products that they produce.

This story is filled with food for thought. Its only disappointment is that the author found it necessary to attach a postscript (moral) about logging the old-growth forest. She ought to have left her story to make the point — which it does exceedingly well.

Mary Pritchard has taught Children's Literature at the University of Western Ontario. Her doctoral thesis studied the political use of Aesop's Fables in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

My Blue Country. O.R. Melling. Penguin, 1996. 196 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-86642-3.

In *My Blue Country* Jesse McKinnock, a seventeen-year-old girl from Calabogie, Ontario, participates in a Canadian cross cultural work project in Malaysia in 1973. Her fictional journal powerfully conveys how the search for harmony between people begins within the individual.

In the first half of her journal, Jesse describes training for the project in two camps in the Canadian wilderness, and right away, the divisions between the disparate groups of young people become apparent. As she records how the French and English speaking participants fail to communicate effectively and meetings are loaded with hostility and fighting, she asks: "Why is it so hard for people just to be people and to respect each other?" She wonders at the irony that if the Canadians cannot resolve their differences at home, how will they ever succeed in building bridges in Malaysia. Yet Lise, the project leader, reminds her, "It's only when we stop trying that all will be lost."

In their effort to make the project succeed, Jesse learns that attitude is the decisive factor. Like other teenagers, Jesse's confidence is susceptible to moments of doubt: "For some reason, I always figure I'm the odd one out, the one without the information or the experience, the one who doesn't know everything." She admits that she is a "small-town girl, in every sense of the word, [but she is] out to learn about the world." For example, Jesse views speaking French as an opportunity "to practise la langue!" and not only do she and the other participants become proficient in French, but they master Malay, as well as bits and pieces of Haida and Polish too. In time, she and her colleagues discover that language, "the greatest barrier" to a community, may become "the greatest bridge."