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Review: The Underneath

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Appelt, Kathi , *The Underneath*. Drawings by David Small. Atheneum Books for Young Readers/ Simon & Schuster, New York, 2008. ISBN: 978-1-4169-5058-5, Ages 10 and up
Awards: Newbery Honor, Booklist Editor's Choice: Book for Youth, 2008.

Description

Abused into cruelty by his father, deserted by his mother, the nameless boy takes a rifle and trudges from Houston to the backwaters of the Louisiana bayou. Finding a deserted cabin, he begins life as he will end it, alone.

Gar Face, as the boy comes to be known to readers, finds a hunting dog and hones abuse to another level upon the stray which he chains in the yard. When the hound accidentally causes a stray shot to enter his own leg causing his owner loses his game, the animal becomes the object of contempt to Gar Face. Beaten and half-starved, he is no longer any kind of a companion; he is alone.

Into this hostile environment cautiously creeps a small calico cat that is not alone. Already heavy with the imminent birth of kittens when she hears the mournful baying of the hound, the little cat's heart tells her that here is one who needs her possibly as much as she needs him. Naming him "Ranger," she knows that she has found a friend. However, danger lurks for her at every turn.

Far underwater and a thousand years ago lived Grandmother Moccasin with a seething hatred for humans. In ages past, Night Song, the moccasin's shape-shifting daughter fell in love with a human. Hawk Man, also gifted with shape-shifting was overwhelmed with his love for the wondrous woman. From their union, came a daughter with shimmering hair and sparkling eyes.

Closer to the surface swims the Alligator King, who in his monstrous size can be rather indifferent to both humans and snakes, but he has chosen to become an ally to Grandmother Moccasin. Eventually, Grandmother's quest to regain her daughter and take revenge on any human in her path is satisfied. Eventually, Ranger and one of the little kittens born to the brave calico mother is avenged, but it is a brutal and often confusing journey that may leave young readers bewildered with biological questions about how a snake and a hawk could produce a hummingbird.

Critique

No doubt, the Newbery awarding committee was impressed by the ebb and flow of Appelt's writing as it imitates the lapping of the murky bayou waters. However, one must ponder how those same committee members could utterly disregard ages at which children are able to grasp the concept of flashbacks, and there are enough of those in these pages to give readers whiplash.

Then there is the issue of shape-shifting. Literary genre dictates that such mysticism belongs in clear fantasy or folk literature; this story is neither. There is no good triumphing over evil as is integral to fantasy, especially for the young audience. There is no clear moral to be learned, as one expects from a theme in traditional literature, unless it is "Don't trust humans." The only victory is the barest and bloodiest survival of life itself with no larger feeling of great things

happening. Vengeance is accomplished and all humans are vanquished, with readers celebrating their demise. The only saving grace is one chapter during which Puck the kitten is finding his inherent cat-courage through several clumsy attempts at pluck. Sadly, that one warm and humorous passage seems totally out of place in this saga of cruelty and carnage.

From this reviewer, the following questions arise: Is this quality literature which adults and children have come to expect from Newbery Honor books since 1922? What is the young reader learning? What is the theme? Is this story even entertaining for the target audience? How will the juvenile audience benefit from this slog through the swamp?