

WORTH READING

Megan Joy Rials and Jasmin Biggs
Each Share a Recommendation

Worth Reading: A Worthy Successor of
Lewis and Tolkien: A Review of *A Green and
Ancient Light* by Frederic S. Durbin by
Megan Joy Rials

Move over, Mr. Tumnus. There's a new faun in town to vie for the hearts of readers of fantastical fiction.

In *A Green and Ancient Light*, Frederic S. Durbin portrays the effects of a country at war through the eyes of the novel's nine-year-old narrator, who is sent to stay at a seaside village with his grandmother one spring and summer. Shattering the sense of peace the village promises, an enemy pilot crash-lands in the supposedly haunted woods behind the home of the narrator's grandmother. Her friend Mr. Girandole, the faun, arrives on the scene to help as she attends to the wounded pilot, whom she regards as simply another human being in need of aid, as his time fighting is over. The story progresses from there, because binding these four unlikely individuals together is the "grove of monsters" in the woods that hides a secret: a riddle that can save Mr.

Girandole from a peril even greater than the war. As a faun, Mr. Girandole can access eternity only through Faery. But decades before, he put his own life — a life with a span much longer than that of a human being — at risk by choosing to remain on Earth to be with the woman he loved, which made him the last faun on Earth. The four main characters must band together to solve the mystery of the garden of statues and find the door to Faery, because it is Mr. Girandole's only chance of rejoining his people and eventually being united in eternity with his true love. But time is running out: while the war rages, their search for the portal intensifies, as the narrator's summer with his grandmother draws closer to its end and the worlds of Faery and Earth grow further apart, threatening to close forever the portal the garden holds.

The parallels to England during World War II are undeniable, but Durbin refrains from naming the town or the nation or, in fact, any of the characters, whom Durbin refers to by using the initials of their first names. Except, that is, for Mr. Girandole, the faun. It is fitting that in a novel celebrating Faery, this creature of the imagination is the book's only named and most vividly drawn character. His devotion to the narrator's grandmother is heartwarming, as are his overall tender, romantic nature and gentle spirit. Despite the lack of any names in the novel, either personal or geographic, Durbin finely crafts all four main characters and imbues them with unique personalities, particularly the narrator's grandmother, who is simultaneously loving, formidable, and resourceful. The atmosphere, too, is clearly drawn; Durbin paints a beautiful portrait of a small village, with all the familiarities and quarrels its intimacy breeds, in his portrayals of kind neighbors, nosy townspeople, and

cold military officials. Finally, Durbin's careful, detailed descriptions of the garden of stone statues and the lush surrounding forest transport readers into a different world, one that somehow feels more real than our own. (Little wonder: in his acknowledgments, Durbin explains that the forest and garden are based on a magnificent statue garden in Bomarzo, Italy, commissioned by Pier Francesco Orisini, an Italian patron of the arts.)

Durbin's literary techniques, such as his already mentioned refusal to name his characters and locales and his choice not to divide the book into chapters (simple page breaks signal changes in the narrative), might be off-putting to some readers. The novel also lacks a strong structure, as the plot tends to meander in its dependency on the characters' slow progress in solving the garden's riddles. For this reader, however, the absence of identifying names and locations only emphasizes the sense of universality of the novel's themes. The lack of chapter breaks, meanwhile, helps to propel the gradually unfolding narrative forward and to heighten the sense of urgency of the search for the garden's portal. It also reflects the structure of life as we experience it (which the narrator's youthful viewpoint further underscores): a steady stream of events that are not broken into clear divisions or categories until we pause to reflect on our experiences.

The absence of a clearly defined narrative arc makes way for Durbin's greatest literary accomplishment in *A Green and Ancient Light*: his strong emphasis on his characters and their relationships with one another. His beautifully crafted prose depicts God's great gift of relational capacity to human beings, as he lovingly depicts a strengthening familial bond between

grandmother and grandson, the dedication of Mr. Girandole and the narrator's grandmother to one another, the budding friendship between Mr. Girandole and the narrator, and the precarious connections the enemy soldier finds with these other three main characters as he gradually learns to befriend those he thought were enemies. These relationships form the core of the novel as the four characters race against the clock to solve the garden's riddle and discover the secret portal back to Faery to save Mr. Girandole from the terrible fate of being barred from eternity. "Enchantment," which for J.R.R. Tolkien is fantasy's highest achievement, pervades this novel, and in its climax, readers sense the "eucatastrophe," or the "sudden joyous 'turn,'" that Tolkien describes in his famous essay "On Fairy Stories."¹ In this tale of unlikely friendships, wartime resilience, and a love so strong and pure that it is willing to sacrifice its own happiness for the good of its beloved, Durbin has tapped into the mysterious longing C.S. Lewis describes as "Joy" or *sehnsucht*, particularly in the novel's emotional climax, which reduced this reviewer to tears and aching for our eternal home. Although in the denouement, Durbin does not shy away from the devastating effects of war and of time, the memory of magic lingers — and as the last lines of the book subtly demonstrate in the narrator's return to the woods, this is enough to sustain us for a lifetime.

Tolkien and Lewis are clearly this novel's spiritual fathers, and for their fans who long for one more story, *A Green and Ancient Light* is a worthy successor of their

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (1964; repr., London: HarperCollins, 2001), 53, 68.

tradition by echoing their work without ever veering into merely derivative territory. Through embedding the faith into the very bedrock of the novel, Durbin demonstrates he has embraced Tolkien's and Lewis's wisdom about Christian storytelling. Narnia's Mr. Tumnus would be proud to share any reader's shelf with Mr. Girandole.

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Worth Reading: A Book Review of *What is Heaven Like?*, Richard Eng, by Jasmin Biggs

In his memoir *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis gives the name "joy" to the longing ache that accompanies a particularly striking encounter with beauty or goodness. Distinguishing it from both happiness and pleasure, Lewis describes Joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."² He also describes it as "the inconsolable secret" in each one of us, an ache for the glory for which we are made, our "desire for our own far-off country."³

Under this definition, Richard Eng's new children's book titled *What is Heaven Like?* sparks Joy.⁴ This simple story offers an encounter with beauty and wisdom that

² C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012), 17-18.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 29.

⁴ Richard Eng, *What Is Heaven Like?* (New York: WestBow Press, 2022).

Bibliography

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