

A Key to Treehouse Living

Elliot Reed

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In Elliot Reed's captivating *A Key to Treehouse Living*, William Tyce narrates the unusual and personalized glossary of his troubled young life. William was abandoned by his parents and transferred to the custody of an eccentric uncle when he was young. When his uncle's behavior turns criminal and sends him to prison, William, now in his teens, again finds himself abandoned and left to navigate the sometimes wondrous, sometimes unsavory world at large.

Reed deftly advances William's story along with the alphabetical list, such as the earlier BABY MEMORIES, which ironically "don't exist" even though "everything was a game and all you needed was air and milk," to the XYLOPHONE, HOMEMADE that William sees another prisoner solemnly playing when he visits his uncle in jail. In between are various other brief, impressionistic entries, each clarifying a new element of William's unsettled existence.

William's voice is appealingly and alternately streetwise, poetic, comic, melancholy, and confused. He encounters the crazily charismatic drifter El Hondero at the public library, contemplates clouds of yellow butterflies or snapping turtles that can "rip through a bicep," and sails away on a makeshift raft to escape being a ward of the state. Finding food like edible mushrooms and staying afloat become primal necessities, with the occasional companionship of a mysterious blind white river rat. Certain people can be helpful—or at least entertaining—while others are unreliable or exploitative.

Through its deceptively simple structure, *A Key to Treehouse Living* creates a portrait of a compelling, perceptive adolescent who keeps slipping through society's cracks, either due to circumstances or of his own volition. By the novel's end, William is still troubled and at risk, but with the hope that perhaps his curious resilience will help him keep adding to the glossary of his distinctive alphabet.

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