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Alice Yazzie's Year

Ramona Maher
Shonto Begay, illustrator
Tricycle Press (March 2004)
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Twelve months in the life of a young Navajo girl are full of the unexpected. Alice Yazzie's days contain baby lambs, strip mines, going to the principal's office, Donald Duck, and even the death of a close friend. It is a year that is both familiar and new to readers, who are guaranteed to love this child and her world.

Alice Yazzie, age eleven, lives with her grandparents and attends school on the reservation, where the family lives. Each month has a brief, treasured moment, which makes Alice and her family and friends very real.

Particularly poignant experiences are those in April and June. In April, Alice's playmate, Jimmy Benally, has a pet coyote with yellow eyes. (Notes at the end of the book about the Navajo Country and ways of life explain why the coyote is not valued as a pet; folklore considers the coyote a trickster.)

When Jimmy's pup, with its yellow coat and blue paws, wanders off, Jimmy imagines that it is teasing rabbits somewhere. Alice Yazzie knows that her friend is still looking for his dog, even though Jimmy says it will never return.

In June, Jimmy Benally is in a hospital after having been hit by a truck. Alice Yazzie finds a yellow mixed-breed pup, part coyote with blue paws, and takes it to the hospital to show her friend. As she arrives and looks through his window, she sees the doctor shake his head. "Alice wonders, though, whether Jimmy saw the puppy before he died." She keeps the little dog and names it for her friend.

Moments like this grab readers' emotions and take Alice Yazzie's story beyond the typical children's picture book. In just a few paragraphs for each month, the author, a poet and storyteller, crafts a lyrical narrative that invites readers into the Navajo world where old ways are valued, elders are respected, creative thinking and emotions are explored.

Maher writes books about the American West, including the award-winning Their Shining Hour. The illustrator, whose lineage includes medicine men, has written, illustrated, and edited more than a dozen books. His light-dappled paintings are impressionistic, evoking the texture of blankets, a quick moving child, the colors of adobe and turquoise, swirling dust, and yellow fur.

Alice Yazzie says that, "There are places one simply has to go given the chance." There are books to be read again and again, given the chance, and this is one.

LINDA SALISBURY (October 16, 2003)

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