



Children of the Wild

Krysta Tawlks

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In Krysta Tawlks's suspenseful fantasy novel *Children of the Wild*, a teenager inherits the power to transform into a mythological creature.

In the early twentieth century, fourteen-year-old Elbert is a farm boy living in the Salinas Valley. He cares for his siblings, who manage their chores while trying to overcome their grief over their youngest sister's death. He receives little guidance from his father. Then Elbert is overtaken by foreboding: he thinks that he might be cursed. He sprouts feathers and discovers that his body generates sparks.

The question of why Elbert is at the center of the changes to the world around him is engrossing. He witnesses a fire lizard swarm and notes the presence of roaming beasts who are rumored to be magical. He is fearful of being ostracized, so he is empathetic to the beasts. He also meets a trio of Mexican women who are different, like him. They teach him to harness his abilities and warn about adversaries with steam-powered weapons. There are scenes of fire and healing, as well as evidence of earth-based magic.

The book's picturesque valley setting, with its fruit orchards and vibrant local community that includes migrant field hands, grounds the fantasy in a period that's just as fertile as the book's subtle themes concerning how communities handle differences among their people. Elbert's rift with a friend, in particular, highlights his divided loyalties to those whom he loves and those whom he meets.

Across the generations, a family protects others through the gift of fire in *Children of the Wild*, a bracing fantasy novel about self-acceptance, grief, recovery.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2023)

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