

NaLee

Erin Sankey

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Swimming with dolphins, exploring ancient caves, and discovering unknown creatures are just a few of the adventures readers will encounter in *NaLee*, the first book in a new trilogy by Erin Sankey.

After his parents are killed in a tragic accident, Frances's long-lost grandmother whisks him away to live with her on a private island off the coast of Florida. The island and ocean are filled with exotic creatures, and Frances is amazed to meet NaLee, a beautiful mermaid. As the two become close, they share incredible experiences on land and in the sea, and Frances adjusts to his new life. Lurking in the background of his happiness, however, are mysteries of his family's past, the murder of his grandfather, and a suspicious sheriff.

Sankey is clearly full of imaginative ideas, and Frances, often with NaLee, goes on the types of adventures children often dream of: exploring a sunken pirate ship, riding in a hot air balloon, finding an abandoned UFO, and flying in a jet plane. Frances's interactions with new-found human friends around the beaches of Florida are also described.

With such a wide breadth, the narrative might fare better without the overarching mystery. The attempt to bind each little adventure into a larger narrative creates a rather disjointed story with key elements left underdeveloped. Instead, Sankey should focus on fully developing each episode, as many of the chapters could be short adventure stories on their own.

Despite the imaginative seeds, the book struggles on many levels. Run-on sentences, repetition, and incorrect grammar make the text confusing and at times tedious. Very often, readers are simply told, "This made [Frances] happy" or "it was interesting," when further elaboration or description would have been far more engaging. The dialogue also poses a problem, being almost frustratingly inauthentic and often awkward or redundant as it tries to convey emphasis or slang.

Sankey does make an effort to bring her characters and setting to life with unique and sometimes quirky characteristics, such as a wild pig that likes to be fed cabbage and the mad scientist garb Frances's grandmother wears when in her candy lab.

Sharing the story aloud might be the best option for this book, as the overall simplicity and fantastic adventures might appeal to a younger audience than the reading level.

With a narrower focus and heavy editing, the bright stories Sankey has a knack for could truly shine.

ALICIA SONDHI (May 24, 2012)

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