

Nobody's Boy from Caneela

Frances Stewart

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Rance is a young orphan growing up in a town called Cattleburg during the Depression. While out hunting one day, he gets lost, falls into a well, and is bitten by a rattlesnake. But before Rance passes out, someone pulls him out of the well. When he wakes up three days later in a cave, the bite on his leg has been treated, but he is all alone.

Deciding to explore the cave, one of Rance's neighbors—a man known as old Simon—appears and takes Rance to a room where he finds an ivory spear and an eagle-feather headdress. Simon also shows Rance a drawing on the wall and asks him to read the message contained within the picture. He then helps Rance discover a hidden cavern that can only be unlocked with the slate necklace Rance wears around his neck. As Rance is marveling at these discoveries, Simon disappears.

Eventually Rance finds his way back to his resting place in the cave. He is confused about his experience—was it real or was it a dream? The next day he finds his way home. His adventure has raised questions that he knows he must find answers to.

Rance's story is compelling. He does not know who his parents are or why he was left on his guardian's porch as a four-year-old. Everyone in town thinks of him as "Nobody's Boy," and he feels unsure of his place in the world. His journey into the woods becomes a sort of vision quest, and because of it, he makes some incredible discoveries about himself.

Nobody's Boy from Caneela is an enjoyable book. Stewart's descriptions of time and place are well written and contain details that will help children understand what life was like in the 1930s. For example, she writes, "Rance's bare feet burned on the hot stones on the dirt road. He only wore shoes to church in the wintertime."

The story's only flaw is that Rance's actions often contradict his emotional state. For instance, he is afraid of the Swamp Ghost, a local legend said to inhabit the forest. Despite this fear, Rance goes looking for the creature, ignoring basic safety precautions like marking his trail. Additionally, when Rance wakes up in the cave, he is lost, afraid, and in pain, but rather than trying to find his way home, he decides to explore and even laughs at his predicament when he slips and falls. His reactions do not seem authentic, and this detracts from the story's believability.

Nobody's Boy from Caneela is part historical fiction, part coming of age story, and part tall tale. Stewart, who has a master's degree in education, does an artful job of weaving together the strands of a deceptively complex plot into a story that is interesting, entertaining, and educational. Young readers aged six to nine will find much to enjoy within this book's pages.

CATHERINE THURESON (September 26, 2012)

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