Clarion Review

General

Tales of Jonathan
Keith Nicol
AuthorHouse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* meets Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* in this absorbing fantasy novel by debut author Keith Nicol. The multifaceted *Tales of Jonathan* takes readers on an adventure that uses the magic of the fairy tale to explore sophisticated philosophical questions about the very nature of reality.

The story opens in a classroom where Paul, a shy teenager, finds that he will be playing opposite the enchanting Bethany in an upcoming school play. Nicol expertly captures the everyday rhythms of the classroom, from the the students' banter to the teacher's efforts to get their attention. All seems perfectly normal until Paul and Bethany start taking walks in the woods together. There, they create a fantasy world known only to the two of them, much like Paterson's Jess and Leslie in the magical forests of Terabithia.

It's not long before the boundaries between playacting and reality begin to blur for the young couple. Revelations from Bethany suggest they are living out a story written by her foster brother, Jonathan, before he died. Or perhaps it's actually several stories. And did Jonathan really die, or did he simply enter his own tale and get lost there? This is where *Tales of Jonathan* enters Hesse territory; only in this case, the book-in-a-book becomes a play-within-a-play repeated ad infinitum.

The first chapters of *Tales of Jonathan* are truly enchanting. Secret meadows nourish the budding romance, offering a safe place to exchange the heartfelt vows of young love. The first third of the novel, in fact, could easily stand alone as a coming-of-age story using fairy-tale imagery. The imagery, however, becomes darker and much less linear as Nicol unfolds the story from a variety of ever-changing perspectives.

"Dreams that have no end are no longer dreams," writes Nicol, as he enters into Paul's kaleidoscopic dream scape, where each character's reality echoes another's in slightly different

form. Paul is Daniel is Jonathan, while Bethany is Megan is Tyamka.

Nicol addresses the slippery substance of reality from every angle, repeating the main story and many of its key phrases in slightly different contexts each time. While the intellectual exercise is fascinating, it is easy to lose the thread of the story in all of the rearranging, which makes for some challenging reading.

Anyone interested in exploring the boundaries between fantasy and reality will enjoy Nicol's story, but *Tales of Jonathan* may find its best audience among young adult readers who are sorting through the same questions about the limitations of real life as Paul and Bethany.

Sheila M. Trask