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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ PICTURE BOOKS

The Golden Aspen

Cheryl A. Price
Cheryl Price
Joshua Allen, illustrator
Softcover $12.95 (32pp)
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The brilliant yellow foliage of the golden aspen in the Colorado mountains has long inspired artists, including legendary photographer Ansel Adams. It also inspired Cheryl A. Price's tale of how the famed tree received its color.

The premise for this richly illustrated story is that a lonely little tree grows unappreciated, scorned, and taunted by the surrounding cedars, scrub oaks, and firs. The birds and animals recognize his potential and tell him to pay "no heed to those treesÂ…You are the best of trees."

The gray wolf shares with the aspen sapling what he sees on his travels: rivers, mountains, waterfalls, and even creatures that walk on two legs. Eventually, a boy in shepherd's garb arrives. The tree and his animal friends provide shelter for the shivering boy during a storm. The boy vows to return, and fifteen years later he comes back as a man to reward the tree with fall color and a royal title.

Price verbally paints the beauty of the mountains with her descriptions of meadows and flowers. She writes, "when the wildflowers disappeared, [the tree] saw cactus burst forth with red flowers that crowned their thorny heads."

Joshua Allen's stunning illustrations of verdant meadows, purple mountains, and textured feathers and fur are even more vivid than the prose, lifting readers into the mountain setting.

The book, however, contains curious, unexplained story elements. Who is the biblical-looking boy who appears in the Colorado mountains? Adding to the mystery, the boy "walks as if he carries a great burden, but I see nothing on his shoulders." The burden is never explained. When he returns many years later, the tree thinks he sees a red scar on the man's forehead. The stranger didn't have a scar when he was there before, and there is no explanation for it. Additionally, an illustration that appears before the man's pronouncement that the little tree will now have golden leaves depicts an aspen already splendidly golden. This leaves readers wondering what color the fall leaves have been for the past fifteen years.

Puzzles aside, the tale is a gentle story of kindness and good deeds, regardless of how a person (or a little tree) is treated in life. *The Golden Aspen* offers new Rocky Mountain folklore with a worthy message.
(March 16, 2010)

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