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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ JUVENILE FICTION

The Secret Prince of Tir Na-Nog: Tales from the Higher Realm, Book 1

M.J. Bell
Alexis Cala, illustrator
Opus II Books (May 2008)
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Deston Lesperance's world is in turmoil. His mother is missing, presumed dead, and he is being shipped to France to live with a cousin of his mother's, whom he's never heard of before. This premise alone would be enough to create a book worth reading. However, M.J. Bell's, *The Secret Prince of Tir-na-nOg: Tales from the Higher Realm* takes this relatable childhood fear and creates a fantastical, mysterious adventure with many unexpected twists and turns.

"'My mom's not dead like everyone else says!' he blurted out. A soft light came to NiNi's eyes. 'Oui, I know.'" Deston's mother's cousin, NiNi knows his mother is still alive but also wants to protect him from the evil that took her away from him. His determination and curiosity win out as he and his new friend Margaux set off into the forest and enter a whole new realm. They encounter both friend and foe in the cast of characters Bell has assembled. Zumwald, the gatekeeper, starts them on their adventure: "'…think carefully before you answer, Deston. Are you willing to accept the risks and do whatever it takes to find your mother?' 'Yes! Of course, I will do whatever it takes…'" And that he does. With the help of other mystical creatures, Deston battles Rellik the wolf, Verosse, the king of the bats, and the vile Grossard.

The mystical setting adds as much excitement as the eerie cast. Bell's descriptions bring them alive: "…but those lush, green slopes were a far cry from this stark, foreboding rock face. There was no vegetation of any kind—only jagged, protruding boulders and crevices that cast unearthly shadows across its surface, adding to its sinister appearance." Alexis Cala's detailed, black and white illustrations at the beginning of each chapter foreshadow what lies ahead, but readers will often be surprised by what they represent. Cala's interest in fantasy and mythology is evident—as well as her BFA in Traditional Illustration from Academy of Art University in San Francisco.

Bell's first published work will surprise and intrigue middle and young adult readers. The frequent violence and occasional gore make it inappropriate for a younger reader. The ending will be satisfying until the page is turned to the epilogue. There it will be discovered that "happily ever after" is only temporary—leaving a clear path to Book Two. (August 18, 2009)

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