

The Smallborn

Martha Zimmer

Rachel Kohanski, Illustrator

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Ivy Teasel is twelve winters old and impatient for life outside her sheltered home to begin. She's anxious to shed her youngling status and grow into a helpful member of her community and to discover her specific gift or talent. But it's difficult being the youngest child and only daughter in a caring family with four older brothers.

Ivy is just your average, petulant pre-teen seeking answers, except that she belongs to the Smallborn, an entire society of small people (think fairies without the wings), which has literally carved out a life in trees and caves in the countryside over several generations.

This is the story of nearly one year in her life—as she begins school and learns more about what it really means to be Smallborn and how her actions connect with those who surround and care for her—such as her mother, Thimbleberry, and her father, Poppy, and her brothers Burdick, Mallow, Sorrel, and the very creative Pansy. Adding to her personal adventures and misadventures, a mysterious stranger to the community complicates and disrupts life in the village, but the Smallborn, as always, put their trust in the Shepherd.

Zimmer, in her debut novel, has created a delightful niche for the Smallborn to inhabit. Readers who enjoy fantasy will be in their element as they encounter such fanciful touches as Grandma Purslane's collection of human dollhouse furniture and a toy tea set, the tiny fairy deer who drop to the ground and refuse to move at the mere hint of trouble, and the detailed description of the Teasel home and meals, including fried cattail, roasted thigh of chicken, and grape-mint jelly. Zimmer plans to continue her protagonist's story in several more books, calling it the *Ivy of the Smallborn* series.

Each of the seventeen chapters is preceded with a good-sized and very life-like quality illustration depicting a moment or scene from that chapter. These black and white drawings are the work of Kohanski, a talented artist in her own right who also happens to be the author's daughter.

There are certainly religious overtones in the story, but it's presented as part of the Smallborn culture, rituals, and history. Readers learn as Ivy learns, such as in this early exchange with the young teacher, Marigold:

'Welcome all of you. I know you have been told many times about the Gifts, how they came from the Shepherd who has spread them out among us. Why did He do this?' she asked.

There was a silence and then Lupine answered, 'So everyone knows he is needed.'

Ivy's year includes learning about the "Binding Ceremony," as when Burdick and Marigold become a couple, witnessing the beautiful "Changing" when one close to her ages and leaves the Smallborn, and discovering and growing into her very own special Gift.

At its heart, this is the story of an inquisitive young girl wanting to learn more about herself and the world around her and her journey towards that end.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (February 17, 2011)

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