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The Stone Heart

D.S. Foster
Jesse Lewis, illustrator
ShadeTree Publishing (May 1, 2012)
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Faced with a heartbreaking choice, the young protagonist in *The Stone Heart* demonstrates how faith and courage can overcome fear, and how selflessness, though sometimes difficult, can reap the purest rewards.

The second book in the Deep Forest Adventures Series finds Lee torn as he considers two equally pressing problems. Not only are his aunt and uncle, his guardians, on the verge of losing their home, but the lake in the nearby forest has become poisoned, threatening the entire local ecosystem. When the boy is presented with a seemingly easy solution that could solve his family's problems, he has to look within himself to find the courage to make the right choices—choices that will allow him to step into a very important role and fulfill his destiny.

Lee's quest takes him from the forest into an alternate world of stone and down into the depths of a black lake to an abandoned, underwater city. Each one of these settings is vividly imagined by Foster, with descriptions of enormous temples made from stone trees and a quartz forest awash in golden light. These descriptive touches help bring the story to life, and will transport young readers as they follow Lee's journey.

Foster balances reality with fantasy throughout this unique and often touching story. He includes fantastic elements like talking animals and a formidable half eagle-half man named Agrippa, but Lee's fears and frustrations are realistic and relatable. He sometimes questions why he has been chosen for such a trying task and considers an alternative action that would sacrifice the forest and all its animals, and almost comes to a point where he wants to give up entirely.

In a pivotal scene, Lee receives guidance from the spirit of Mithorn, a stag that was introduced in the first book. As Mithorn is already dead by the time this novel starts, there is not quite enough of an opportunity to fully understand his significance or the role he is bestowing onto Lee. The scene as a whole then, while convincing, doesn't feel as momentous as it is clearly supposed to be. However, it is through this scene and the subsequent choices Lee makes that Foster's themes about faith, destiny, and courage are most clearly exhibited. These themes give the book depth, making it an entertaining and thought-provoking choice for readers from eight to eleven years of age.

The cover, depicting a rather intense moment when Lee faces Agrippa, is detailed and compelling and fits the story well. However, the printed illustrations throughout the book fall short of that standard, perhaps because of the print quality, or maybe because they are in black and white. The results are sometimes blurry and often a distraction rather than a complement.

With a third book in this series on the way, readers can look forward to more of Foster's rich descriptive style, unique stories, and intriguing themes.

ALICIA SONDHI (April 17, 2012)

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