

Nightingale's Nest

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Recommended for ages: 9-13

This story, set somewhere in the Southern US, deals with the life of John Fischer, called Little John by his peers. During summer, he spends his time helping his father (who cleans gardens and fields) with small tasks. It is on one of these jobs, working for a rich store owner called Mr. King when John meets Gayle, a young and unusual girl. Through his introduction to the girl, we learn things about both of them: John's family is in tatters, due to the death of his sister, Raelynn, who fell from a tree, and Gayle is living with a foster family, the Cutlins, while her parents come back for her. "They flew away" she says. The two establish a quick friendship and John notices a few of the girl's quirks, including her tendency to sing, climb trees (which she considers her friends) and build nests and also the abuse that she faces at the hands of Mrs. Cutlin and her son Jeb. Her singing, exceedingly beautiful, captivates John. While playing, John gets a small cut, Gayle starts a song, birds gather and the cut heals. John is surprised but unable to get an answer from Gayle. The same day, when leaving Mr. King's home, John is approached by this man, who offers him a deal, take Gayle to sing for him and he will give John \$500. His family's unstable financial state, augmented by his mother's increasing instability since his sister's death, convinces John to accept the deal. The next few days, he manages to sneak away from his father, who does not know about the deal, and spend more time with Gayle. He tells her about the troubles in his life, including his father's alcoholism (which puts a dent on the checks that they get for every job) and his own decision to drift away from his friend Ernest, in order to avoid giving information about his family life. One of these days, after Gayle explains the process by which she built her nest, John introduces her to his father, the two get along well and his father shows a soft side by talking intimately to Gayle.. However, when Mr. King exits his house to talk to John's father, Gayle runs away.

A few days later, not having seen Gayle, John decides to go to the Cutlins house and ask for her. The Cutlins are surprised that the two know each other, but Gayle comes out, John notices bruises and welts on her body. They play more and John convinces Gayle to sing for Mr. King, she starts and is initially more open, but suddenly, King's expression changes and Gayle gets very scared. At the same time, John hears his father calling, scared to admit the truth or to interfere, he leaves, but King promises to pay him, just as he approaches Gayle menacingly.

The next day, John sees Gayle, but she looks very traumatized and her voice, formerly crystalline, is now rough, she runs away from him quickly. When his father calls him to King's house, Mr King pays John upfront and thanks him for Gayle's wonderful voice, his father is confused, so the whole situation is explained; at that moment, angered at the adults' attitude, John throws the money at Mr King and walks away after screaming at him, his father apologizes and picks up the money. When they get home, John is beaten with a belt, and his mother listens disappointed to what he did, but is relieved that the job is still on, since the rent is coming up, and the family is inching closer and closer to eviction. The night is dark and John wakes up the next day, his father tells him to stay home and stay away from Mr King. Deciding to help his mother, John is instructed to pay the landlord \$600, which they were able to gather using the 500 from Mr. King. His mother leaves to run errands and while staying alone, John is angered so much that he takes the money, leaving a few dollars for the landlord with a written promise for the rest. He runs the 5 miles to Mr. King's house, but he is derailed by an ambulance. His father, cutting down one of the large trees, was severely injured. While his father gets taken to the hospital, John sees Gayle and gives her the money, she promises to keep it in her nest with the rest of her treasure.

The family spends the next few days in the hospital, until John's father is released. John left the house earlier to try to reconcile with his friend Ernest on his birthday, but when he returns he sees his mother crying, holding the eviction notice. His father scolds him after finding out that the money is gone, but is unable to beat John due to his injuries. John leaves early the next morning, runs again but finds that Gayle's nest is broken and the money is gone, he talks to Jeb and figures out that the Cutlins have it. Desperate, he walks around town looking for a way to make 500 dollars, but finds nothing, he returns home and talks to his father, who says that there is one more job: cutting down Gayle's tree, the Cutlins are paying 550, but John has to do it. He goes back and cuts it, ashamed at the look Gayle gives him, and as he returns home, pleading with Gayle, they see Mr King. He looks disheveled and frail, begging them to sing for him, but they refuse. At that moment, a storm of birds flies in, John hears a song and faints, Mr King recovers and Gayle disappears. Knowing that it can only be magic, John is befuddled, but decides to let the matter rest, they are able to pay the month's rent and live off of church donations. Two weeks later, Mr King dies and distributes his large wealth, leaving a significant amount to John's family.

The book is loosely based on a story by Hans C. Andersen, which lends a nice variety to classic literature. I liked it, found it very thoughtful and human, the characters were believable and the struggles that they undergo are very real. I found Little John to be round, his handling of the complications not ideal, but very engrossing. I also appreciated the subtlety when weaving in the magical realism, too many stories have very overt uses of magic, which becomes very dull. The only issue that I had was the portrayal of the mother, her mental state was understandable, but justification for it was slightly excessive, the use of Raelynn as a mirror of Gayle was predictable and weakened the mother's struggle.

I would recommend this book.

Recommended Readings:

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson

The Junction of Sunshine and Lucky by Holly Schindler

What the Moon Said by Gayle Rosengren