



Toby and the Secrets of the Tree

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This novel allows few 'new readers begin here?' concessions to those unfamiliar with its predecessor, **Toby Alone**, the first book of this two-part adventure. A newcomer might well be confused by the large cast, all bringing their histories with them from the earlier book. For *The Tree*, the single oak which is the world travelled by Toby Lolness in his search for his enslaved parents, is teeming with characters and perils. There is some hidden help for those who happen to unwrap the dust jacket, for on the reverse we find all the characters perched on branches of *The Tree*, in poses borrowed from François Place's illustrations within the text.

Toby Alone, translated into 22 languages, has won a dozen or more international awards, including the UK's Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation, 2009. The novels are French in origin, and it is to the credit of the translator, Sarah Ardizzone, that she preserves a sense of the foreign in **Toby and the Secrets of the Tree**. The narrative style is distinctive in the brevity of its sentences - yet far from this resulting in naivety, the novel carries echoes of the miseries of life and death, of courage and resilience, in Nazi concentration camps. The book is also charged with a Green agenda, a threat of sexual violence, and a recurring contrast between the homely and the heroic. Some sentences are phrased in a kind of 'almost-English?': 'Roll up your sleeves, you load of miseryguts?'; or, 'He looked like a grimy lump?'. As the hero and heroine at last find each other towards the end of their tortuous adventures, we read 'There was something tender about their skins not being the same temperature.' Out of context, here in this review, the language may well seem simply odd or even awkward - but once a reader is lost in this book, the narrative rhythms and the unusual idioms become attractive features of what the novel offers.

This sense of otherness, alongside the excitement of the adventure, may extend young readers' experience and enjoyment as they become absorbed in the world of the great oak tree, which seems as limitless as Tolkien's Middle Earth or Pullman's parallel world. There is humour in the events and in the telling, and also a continuing fascination in sharing the perspectives of Toby, who is a mere 1.5 mm in height. An insect we might crush between finger and thumb is a towering danger to him, a branch which we would measure in centimetres is a day's journey fraught with challenges invisible to our eyes.

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