

The Monitor

TOP SHELF: A wild childhood

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By David Bowles

As a boy, I loved to read adventure stories, especially novels in which kids my age had to wrangle with pirates, beasts, aliens or the elements. Even cooler to my prepubescent mind were real-life stories of survival in hostile lands (a subgenre I still love). The recent childhood memoir by Jerry Craven, struck a definite cord, and I devoured the seventeen true-life tales with breathless abandon.

Saving a Songbird and Other True Stories from Texas to Venezuela primarily deals with the five years Jerry spent as a child in Venezuela, dragged there from Texas with his family by a father obsessed with gold and diamonds. In that distant land, amidst jungles and savannahs, Jerry grapples with a world whose architecture is exposed by the actions of adults and the immediacy of “Nature, red in tooth and claw.” Faith, goodness, death, loyalty, racism, and love are the weighty topics woven in and out of briskly paced stories in which narrative voice and literary flair are deftly balanced. Stand-outs are “Stoning the Tooth Fairy,” about the fallout from Jerry’s discovering that Santa doesn’t exist; “Saving a Songbird,” a powerful reflection on the consequences of human action; “Learning the Stars,” in which Jerry is confronted with the devastation of death; “Hunting Tigers,” a bittersweet exploration of friendship and that ineffable first kiss; “Going Native,” a rousing tale of Jerry’s awakening to the racism around him and his memorable reaction to it, a thematic thread that is picked up again in “Ratboys” as a teenaged Jerry in Texas is confronted by the racial ugliness in his home town.

The collection is bookended by two moving pieces that address the themes of the memoir from a more adult point of view: “Waiting for Grace,” a profile of Jerry’s grandfather, a philandering preacher who finds God’s grace in bubbles of milk; and “The Architecture of the Dead,” which similarly examines Jerry’s father and the lessons his flawed but honest life contain for his surviving son.

Craven, an accomplished author with 24 titles under his belt, has crafted a wonderful slice of weird but delightfully illuminating life. This memoir evokes the very best writing for boys, titles like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Call of the Wild*, *My Side of the Mountain*, *A Boy’s Life*, *Treasure Island*, *The Swiss Family Robinson* ... Pure nostalgia for this man, and a reservoir of adventure for my son, to whom I gladly pass my copy.

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http://www.themonitor.com/life/valley_life/article_52734b54-ced8-11e2-bf55-001a4bcf6878.html

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