

An Enchanting Journey

The Forest by Susan Prudhomme (OakTara, February 2011) 242 pages.

Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

Author Susan Prudhomme begins this wonder-filled tale with these tantalizing words:

The Forest lies in velvet mystery on the face of mountains and valleys, its mists spreading amongst the ridges like a sleeping, purring beast.

We soon enter the world of Timkin Tanwarrel and join him on his great adventure. Timkin is a Menchian, one of the little people of the forest, cousins to humans. We are introduced to Timkin with words that engender trust in the teller:

Into the Menchian family of Tanwarrel, Timkin was born. It was a fine family, austere and proud...

The authorial voice is that of classic storytelling. We want to know more. We want to sit by the fire, turn each delicious page, and step into this world.

Timkin is a dreamy adolescent when he accidentally falls into a river and is swept over the falls, into another land. From there the disoriented Menchian embarks on a journey, not sure where he is going, much like each of us, as we too journey through life. We care about Timkin, no matter our age, for we too are travelers and we too are not always sure of our destination.

Many quest-journey tales involve clear goals, places to reach, gold to find, wrongs to right, the lost to be saved. Not so in this story of Timkin and his forest adventures. He is simply lost and trying to survive, to figure it all out. While the reader has a clear sense there is a final destination hovering in the pages, we share with the young Menchian his fear, his struggles, his growth. He falls and we fall; he continues on and we continue on; he is victorious and we are too. With Timkin we become acquainted with talking badgers, lions, birds, and many other creatures, well rounded unique characters with their own stories, their own struggles and doubts.

Over-arching this journey through forest and mountains, alongside lakes and streams, is the One, a being of love and majesty, yet dark forces are also at work. A cosmology of good and evil forms the backdrop for the story, and we see we are bent creatures seeking to be redeemed. Within this framework, the author is not afraid to face some profound questions, probing into the relationships between man and other animals, between animals themselves, and between man and the natural world.

Susan Prudhomme's careful diction perfectly describes the forest and its many landscapes, fully involving our senses:

Here, without the sound of water, the silence became nearly complete. Timkin heard only his own breathing, his soft footfalls, and an occasional snapping twig as he stepped

incautiously. He soon learned to tread as silently as any cat. There were no birdcalls, no squirrel chatter, not even the rustle of a lizard in the dry leaves. Timkin marveled, even as he reveled in his solitude.

Descriptions weave a subtext poetically, in this case honoring the past as a cushion to the present:

At night he found shelter under the larger ferns' fronds, on ground softened by past seasons' fallen leaves.

While clearly influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien, Susan Prudhomme has her own lovely style, drawing us into Timkin's world. I didn't want Timkin's journey to end, to find myself turning the last page.

The Forest will be loved by readers of all ages, a finely written work and a true jewel. We can only hope and pray that the sequel is not long in coming!

Christine Sunderland is author of the trilogy, *Pilgrimage*, *Offerings*, and *Inheritance*. Her fourth novel, *Hana-lani* was released in December 2010. [www. ChristineSunderland.com](http://www.ChristineSunderland.com).