

Young Adult



By TANYA LEE STONE
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Alex Nabaum

In “Alabama Moon,” his first novel, Watt Key has an unusual coming-of-age story to tell. Ten-year-old Moon Blake lives with his “Pap,” an antigovernment war veteran on the far side of paranoid. Since Moon was a toddler, Pap has kept him squirreled away deep in the Alabama woods, far from roads or power lines in “one small room built halfway into the ground.”

The forest they inhabit is vividly portrayed (not surprisingly, since according to the author’s Web site, he spent much of his childhood hunting and fishing in the Alabama woods). But the most riveting images describe a world more rarely seen—the world of extreme survivalist isolation. “Our windows were narrow slits for shooting through and the trees that you saw out of these windows were pocked and chipped from years of Pap and me practicing a stage-one defense,” Moon says matter-of-factly.

From the first sentence of the novel we know that everything will not be O.K. “Just before Pap died, he told me that I’d be fine as long as I never depended on anybody but myself.” By the end of the first chapter, we’re rooting for Moon to break free of his lonely existence. Pap had said there were “other people like us” in Alaska, so after he dies of an infected wound, that is where Moon heads. His blind faith in Pap allows him to believe he can simply walk to Alaska from Alabama alone, toting his dried coon meat, traps, rifle and hatchet in a wheelbarrow.

But while he has grown up learning to fend for himself—trap and grow food, find fresh water, build a shelter—Moon doesn’t know how to be with people. He’s quick to “whip up on” anyone who threatens him; yet he’s not the “wild boy” or “stinkin’ militia trash” people see him as. He’s just a displaced person trying desperately to find his place in the world.

Key has created a rich cast of supporting characters for Moon. After a night in jail (the best place he's ever been, because of the warm food and hot shower), Moon lands in Pinson, a boys' home. Right away, he has to fight off the resident bully, Hal Mitchell. An unlikely friendship begins when Moon takes Hal's punishment for him and sleeps outside in his place. Hal has long worked the tough-guy facade, but we quickly see his decent heart. For one thing, there are the two bloodhounds let loose by the brutal Constable Sanders when the friends escape from Pinson: dogs are always drawn to the good guys, and these two would rather follow Hal forever than return to their awful owner. Moon also meets Kit, a sickly boy who is fascinated by him and wants to help.

Kit has been in and out of detention centers, but once he's on his own with Moon in the woods, he has the time of his life. Through his eyes, we see the value of the knowledge Moon gained during his strange childhood. "Kit began to learn how things were done, and I had to show him less and less." The relationships Moon develops are crucial to his realization that he doesn't want to live in isolation. He later tells Hal: "I'm glad you came and got me. I don't wanna be out there by myself anymore."

Although the ending feels too neat and quickly tied up, Moon's coming to terms with his father's legacy is expertly timed. The boy has always accepted Pap's skewed perception of the world as his own, and Constable Sanders initially gives him reason to hold firm to his father's beliefs. The government is after him, and does intend him harm. But when Kit gets sick in the wilderness and Moon can't make him better with herbs, he eventually must question everything he thought was true.

Moon finally realizes that his survival is dependent upon his rejection of his father's survivalist ideals. As imperfect a world as it may be, people need each other. Not only to survive, but to truly live.

Tanya Lee Stone is the author of the young adult novel "A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl."

ALABAMA MOON

By Watt Key.

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