

Illustrated book contains a surprisingly rich allegory

The Tree that Survived the Winter, by Mary Fahy; Paulist Press (Mahwah, N.J., 1989); 61 pages with illustrations; \$6.95.

By Margaret Brennan, SSJ
Guest contributor

I confess that I picked up this book reluctantly. I fully expected it to be yet another little children's book for adults, with anthropomorphic birds and shrubbery uttering Big Truths. Surely the world has seen enough unfulfilled seagulls, struggling caterpillars and fearful autumn leaves. This, I presumed, would be one more stab at pop-psychology for people who don't like to read real books.

I was wrong. Dead wrong. Mary Fahy packs into 61 short pages volumes of deep, solid spirituality, and insight about the mysteries of suffering and the resilience of the human spirit.

The story line is simple and not particularly original: a tree survives a hard winter after it has been transplanted; it digs in its roots, blooms and grows. What is original — and profound — is that the tree has come through a Dark Night of the Soul. She had felt abandoned, near despair, worthless; she had suffered deeply from outside elements and from her own insecurity.

Her awakening echoes the opening of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

"April is the cruellest month,
breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

The tree has experienced this cruelty of nature: the stirring of roots, the forcing of sap, the mixing of desire and painful memory.

The book's first section reads rather

like a psalm. It runs the gamut — as psalms do — of praise, fear, cries for deliverance and longing for the face of God. It even has its own antiphon: "I have survived the winter and I have grown." In hands less skillful than Fahy's, this repeated cry might be childishly sweet, but in this context it is appropriate and strong.

The tree can feel that her roots are deeper, more firmly established in the earth. She sees that her branches aren't close and trembling like a sapling's, but are reaching out and up to the sun.

But her delight in this new strength dims when she recalls the terror and pain of the winter, and she begins to question the very sun who woke her: "Where were you when I needed you? Didn't you know I was afraid? Didn't you care? I couldn't reach you."

The sun never answers these questions directly. Slowly the tree comes to know her own answers:

"Often during the cold winter she had questioned...but even

while she had trembled with anxiety she felt an inner voice...which remained fluid and alive when everything else in her had seemed paralyzed."

Profound spiritual truth is here, and glimpses into the puzzle of suffering and the nature of faith. The sun and the inner voice are the same, though she has a distance to go before she can know it.

The second part of the book deals with the person of faith in the world. As the spring and summer progress, the tree is able to put aside most of the pain of the winter (though tender spots resurface now and then), and to join the life around her. She is surprised to discover that her presence makes a difference, as children, lovers and an anguished woman describe her with secret names.

Mary Fahy is associate director of Wellsprings, a sabbatical program in Glens Falls for people in ministry, and brings her insight as spiritual director

to this gentle allegory. For the most part, it works well in respecting the sometimes-thin line between authentic spiritual consolation and feel-good sentimentality. It doesn't go for the quick fix or the easy answers, as do so many other books of this genre.

The illustrations are wedded well to the text and heighten the movements of the story. Emil Antonucci, instructor at Parsons School of Design and art director of *Commonweal* magazine, captures in graceful, stippled designs the abstract concepts of solitude, pain, joy and longing.

In spite of its child's-book format, this book is definitely not for kids. It is, instead, for those who have been through winters of their own or who, perhaps, are in one now. It is for those who agree with William Faulkner that we live, not merely to endure, but to prevail. It is for those who understand what Gerard Manley Hopkins meant when he shouted from some private and terrible darkness: "Mine, o thou lord of life, send my roots rain."



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
star in *The Cutting Edge*.
Moira Kelly (left) and D.B. Sweeney

Movie's plot skates on thin ice

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The lure of Olympic gold keeps two bickering ice-skating partners on *The Cutting Edge* (MGM).

Doug (D.B. Sweeney) is down and out after an accident on the college team dashes his dreams of a pro hockey career. Kate (Moira Kelly), a spoiled rich man's daughter, is such an ice queen on and off the rink she can't keep any male partner.

Her coach (Roy Dotrice) matches the two and argues that their fire and ice could translate into Olympic stardom. If they don't kill each other first.

With such a threadbare concept, director Paul M. Glaser's upbeat romance skates on thin ice. The movie does, however, present young people working hard to achieve a goal.

But seen in the context of their growing maturity, *The Cutting Edge* is blandly cheerful entertainment. It's just that on a 1 to 10 scale, this one's no figure eight.

Because of several implied promiscuous encounters and an instance of alcohol abuse, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

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THE TREE THAT SURVIVED THE WINTER

by Mary Fahy; Illustrated by Emil Antonucci
"The Tree That Survived the Winter is deeply encouraging for all those who have overcome their own dark, cold and lonely times. This tree grows hope and faith and is reviving."

—Marsha Sinetar

"It has the latent power of all first-rate allegory: each reader can take from 'the tree' what each needs and therefore sees, and the tree survives all our winters, never ceases to grow, while it carries 'deep within her the memories of all her experiences.'"

—Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.

—Paulist Press

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