



## Wildwood

*Colin Meloy , Carson Ellis (Illustrations)*

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**Wildwood** Colin Meloy , Carson Ellis (Illustrations)

The first book in the epic middle-grade fantasy series full of magic, wonder, and danger—nothing less than an American Narnia—from Colin Meloy, lead singer of the highly celebrated band the Decemberists, and Carson Ellis, the acclaimed illustrator of the New York Times bestselling *The Mysterious Benedict Society*.

***Wildwood* is the first in the Wildwood Chronicles trilogy.**

## Wildwood Details

Date : Published August 30th 2011 by Balzer + Bray

ISBN : 9780062024688

Author : Colin Meloy , Carson Ellis (Illustrations)

Format : Hardcover 560 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Young Adult, Fiction, Childrens, Middle Grade

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## From Reader Review Wildwood for online ebook

### Arielle Walker says

I couldn't get into this one.

The cover is gorgeous, the writing is strong, and the vocabulary fantastic, but the storyline just didn't grab me at all, and the level of war and politics felt very adult - in the dullest sense of the word. It took almost a month to get through and I skimmed the last few chapters to get to the end, and I can't quite put my finger on why as it certainly isn't *bad*...

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### Kaitlin says

I DNF-ed this book in the end, despite reading over 80% of it I just didn't enjoy it. The more I read, the less I liked it... and that's a real shame when it comes to a kids book, because they are often so imaginative and wonderful, but this one just left me cold. I will say that the illustrations within this are lovely, and I had no issue at all with them, in fact they were a large part of why I persevered because I was at least enjoying them, but then it just got too long and tedious for me and I just wasn't invested.

This follows the story of a young girl and her baby brother Mac who is stolen by a murder of crows and taken into Wildwood early in the story. It felt to me that this was trying far to hard to be 'down with the kids' from the start. Lots of modern-day references to things that 'hipsters' might like, but really it just came across as completely cringe-worthy.

The biggest issue with this for me was the fact that I saw everything coming, it was so predictable. I know it's written for children, but even children have brains and can see through a particularly thin plot line... Personally, I wouldn't recommend this to any of the children I know who are readers as they would also see straight to the end of the book and feel bored.

Sadly, not a book I liked, and by the time I gave up on it I felt a bit resentful for just how long it was and how far I had got with it, only to still not feel like it was really giving me a good story. Probably would have got only 2\*'s at most, but I didn't actually finish it in the end.

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### Natalie says

Halfway through this book, I got that sinking feeling.

That, oh no, this is a series, feeling.

I was going to want more, and more, and more, and after every book, I'd have to wait for the next one.

Happily, this first Wildwood novel ties up quite neatly and stands on its own. I'm not going to have to wonder what on earth happens next for the next few years, the desire for a new Wildwood novel warring with my desire for a new Decemberists album. Poor Colin... if he is one of my favorite singers AND one of

my favorite writers, he is going to have to exhaust himself to keep me happy.

This is a fantastic book, written for middle-grades but clever enough for adults. The artwork, by the inimitable Carson Ellis, is woven beautifully throughout the text. I'm quite tempted to order the expensive, autographed edition with color plates... it will be so much nicer than my little unfinished ARC!

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### **Katie Bruce says**

I finally finished this book!!! I think it took me 2.5 months to get through this galley? That's usually not a good sign if it's taking me that long to finish something. To be fair, this book is a chunker--541 pages, to be precise. The concept was actually really fun, in the beginning. A sort of Narnia-meets-Portland kind of thing, but I got bogged down in the language and style really quickly. I mean, it's GREAT to have some complex vocab in a middle grade novel, for sure, but there were definitely some sentences that reminded me of that episode of "Friends" where Joey figures out how to use the thesaurus feature on his computer and uses it for every single word. Sometimes simpler is better, and this book just didn't have a good balance of simple vs. complex language to me. I don't think most kids will read this--at least not all the way through. It should have probably been split into 2 books, as I had trouble remembering who some characters were/what had happened in the beginning when the final battle scene took place. Audience is probably grown up Decemberist fans.

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### **The Rusty Key says**

Reviewed by Rusty Key Writer: Jordan B. Nielsen

Recommended for: Ages 7 to 10, mainly as a read-aloud book for parents. The content is far beneath that, in maturity, of a true middle grade book, but the sheer heft of this volume will likely intimidate younger readers away from reading it themselves.

One Word Summary: Tedious.

Full disclosure: I stopped reading this book after 110 out of its whopping 541 pages. The notion of grinding through the next 431 pages was too discouraging, and I found it unlikely that the book would suddenly improve, unless it was perhaps taken up by a different author midway through. By 110 pages it was evident that Colin Meloy did not grasp certain essential elements of story construction and I lost confidence. When you realize that no one's driving the bus, it's time to jump off.

Luckily the plot was well under way by page nine so I can summarize. Prue is a twelve-year-old girl living in Portland, Oregon. On the day we meet her, her baby brother Mac is lifted out of his little red wagon by a bunch of crows (A murder of crows, as Meloy insists) and carried away to the "Impassible Wilderness"; a dense forest just beyond the limits of town that I'm supposing is inspired by Macleay Park based on a comparison between Meloy's geographical description and Google Maps. In the world of Wildwood, the Impassible Wilderness is not a mere state park, but rather a mysterious, looming place that children are both warned away from and endlessly fascinated by. As he was under her care at the time, Prue feels it is her sworn responsibility to retrieve her brother from the forest. Through the cunning use of a wadded up blanket, Prue manages to convince her parents that their one-year-old is sleeping soundly in his cradle and sneaks out

of the house at dawn with provisions for her journey.

Before reaching the woods she stumbles over Curtis, one of her classmates, not exactly a friend, who doggedly insists upon helping her on her quest. Into the woods they go, after some hemming and hawing on Prue's part about geeky Curtis's company, and wouldn't you know it, this forest is just chalk full of talking animals and strange folk. Prue and Curtis are overtaken by a rowdy band of coyotes dressed in Russian military regalia, naturally, and Curtis is captured, while Prue manages to sneak away. As Prue hitches a ride with the forest's postman (yes, really), Curtis is bound and taken to the underground lair of the dangerously beautiful Dowager Governess, where they reenact the scene from 'The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe' in which the White Witch seduces the doltish Edmund Pevensie with Turkish Delight and flattery, only in this version it's blackberry wine. Clearly this gal is up to no good.

It was at that point when I'd had enough. I will give Meloy credit for this: He handled the introduction of magic into Prue's ordinary world well. One of my greatest literary pet peeves is when characters who are living by the rules of the universe which we the readers live in, fail to respond with an appropriate level of shock when something entirely supernatural happens. When Curtis and Prue first encounter the talking coyotes, thankfully their reaction is closer to "Oh god, I think I'm having a nervous breakdown," than "Oh neat, the animals are talking." In that way, I was ready to buy the magical world that Meloy was selling, but unfortunately the product didn't live up to the pitch.

The chief failing 'Wildwood' is in its character development, namely its utter lack thereof. I cannot think of a single other book in which I felt so completely disconnected from the story's main characters. While Curtis is slightly more present, in that we at least have a mild sense of who he is (granted that sense is of all the clichéd trappings of a geeky, bespectacled, twelve-year-old comic book loving fanboy), Prue is a total blank. Not only are we pitched so quickly into the plot that we have no time to get to know her or sympathize with her, the narration is completely devoid of her perspective. Granted this story is written in the third person, but the charm of the third person is it's omniscient vantage point, and Meloy makes no use of this tool whatsoever. I can't recollect the phrase "Prue thought," occurring a single time. We are never allowed into her inner workings, aside from the most blunt of her emotions, and her few quips, which seem to be thrown in to give her a little sass, come off as snide rather than witty. "'Mother,' Prue had said, now pouring rice milk over her cereal, 'I told you. I'm a vegetarian. Ergo: no bacon.'". I'm not sure which irritated me more: Prue's snotty remark or the past/present tense clashing.

You might notice that not very much happened or is learned in the 110 pages that I read, that that much plot might be managed in just 50 pages. The reasons for this is that the great bulk of what I read, and I suspect what makes the rest of this volume so weighty, are the endless descriptions. Meloy has envisioned his universe very clearly and wants to tell you all about it. This overflow of description makes the poverty of Prue's depiction all the more apparent. It's as if Prue takes a step back while the narrator comes forward and natters on for a few pages about every single (frankly, uninspired) detail of the scenery, before Prue is allowed to step forward again and deliver a line of flat dialogue. Who cares what the world looks like when you don't know who is looking at it? I deeply resented the expectation that I was meant to care about Prue, this place, and her quest based on its implied virtuousness alone.

What makes this all very sad is that Meloy was clearly having a lot of fun while writing this story. To have written 541 page he must have been, and this is allegedly just "Book 1" of many "chronicles" to come. Then there are the obvious illusions not only to Narnia, but Alice in Wonderland, and most prominently to the "Changeling" fairy tales littered throughout Western European folklore in which a child is stolen by winged demons or Fae Folk, taken to a forest region and held for some unimaginable ransom. Meloy is obviously a reader, and likely loved these sorts of stories as a boy and wanted to create one of his own for children of a

new generation to enjoy. Fine intentions, but unfortunately Meloy is so caught up in the lacework of the story that he forgot to sew the dress. Talking animals and lovely woodland realms are great, but we've been there before, and without the novelty of a well written character to carry us through this place it comes off as tired and indulgent rather than crisp and wondrous.

A quick peek at the back jacket flap reveals that Colin Meloy is a singer/songwriter from a band called The Decemberists and that this is his first novel. Far be it from me to discourage anyone from getting into writing books, or to presume to understand Meloy's thoughts or motives, but allow me to cast this warning: Just because you're writing for kids, doesn't mean it will be easy, and just because it has magic in it, doesn't mean that they will like it. Don't underestimate a young reader's desire for the vivid characters and fresh storytelling that they deserve, you will not be rewarded for it.

For more reviews, author interviews and reading lists from The Rusty Key, visit us at [www.therustykey.com](http://www.therustykey.com)

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### **Carmine says**

2 for the writing + 4 for the illustrations which are amazing = 3 over all. I nearly abandoned after the Portland hipster preciousness of the first chapter. Seriously, apparently we needed to establish that 12 year old Prue rides a single speed bike and cruises the new used bins at the record store- very important for aesthetic. Also, it is probably a good thing the crows took the baby because eventually she was going to do some damage hauling him around in a flippin' red wagon tied to her bike and leaving him outside as she stops in at the library. Again, this makes for a great illustration but there is no way any parent is going to let their 12 year old pull a baby in a red wagon behind a bike- even their second child, even portland hipsters. They will be down at the REI with everyone else checking out the saftey specs and how sturdy the harness is on an actual bike trailer and it will be covered with bright reflectors and flags. At first I thought maybe Meloy and Ellis don't yet have a child and that might have something to do with it, but apparently they do. Next time I'm down in Portland I'll have to look for hipsters pulling a baby in a red wagon behind their bike and I'll flag them down for an autograph.

I do have some kids here at the library who choose their reading purely based on the thickness of the book (thicker=better), but it still has to be compelling. I have a hard time seeing them slog on through.

I will read the second in this projected trilogy only if they put it out in picture book format.

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### **Tiffany Liu says**

3.5-3.7 stars

This book is a promising start to a series, introducing a magic wood just outside Portland—a wood with talking animals, sentient trees, coyote soldiers, corrupt governments and highway bandits. It is fascinating

and imaginative, with a fairytale-ish quality for MG readers, as well as twists creepy and dark enough for adult readers. The plot is not super complicated, as this book is about introducing the world, but the solutions didn't feel too convenient, and the plot is great in that it's unpredictable.

I didn't connect greatly to the characters, possibly because there wasn't a great deal of sass. However, I am definitely interested in continuing their story. The writing is lovely, witty and pretty without dragging, though occasionally it felt as if Colin Meloy was intent on using every word in his repertoire.

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### Nhi Le (The Literary Bystander) says

Why is it that every time I hear/read about a story about a girl who sets out to rescue her baby brother from some magical creature in a whole fantasy-esque land, my thoughts immediately turn to *Labyrinth*? I mean, it was kind of hard for me to *ignore* it in *The Iron King* but I also got those type of vibes in this book too. But you know, without the awesomeness that is David Bowie.

*Readers, please - contain yourself.*

But eventually, as I continued reading - this book became this reminder of several things, such as: *The Witches*, *The Snow Queen*, *Coraline*, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (I refer to the movie versions because I haven't read the books yet) and a bunch of other media that I cannot put my finger to it. Yet.

**In a Nutshell:** Prue sets off to rescue her baby brother Mac, after he gets kidnapped and flown away by a murder of crows to a place called the *Impassable Wilderness*. It is basically a whole forest-like area that is said to be uninhabitable and full of dangerous creatures and such. She is joined by fellow classmate Curtis, and soon they realize that the place has a whole different name/type of world living within it as well as a lot of politics, revenge and battles fought as they search for her brother.

In all honesty, I am not too sure if I am able to write down why I enjoyed reading this book. Maybe it was because the cover looks **amazing** - as does the illustrations inside the book. I guess I like being visually stimulated and staring at pretty things.

I liked how determined, resourceful and kind character Prue became. I never did feel pissed off with anything that she did because it was believable and believe me, I haven't met a heroine like that ages. Curtis was okay, I guess - he reminded me of Wybie from the film version of *Coraline* and even though his character really didn't do much for me - I wasn't that annoyed with him or anything.

Even though it was essentially a very simple story of Prue rescuing her brother - there is so much more going on that it surprisingly doesn't make the plot more convoluted, but instead enriches it with these minor subplots that are *relevant* and eventually do interconnect with each other in the end. The writing was okay, and the story was relatively consistent in its pacing and it does get very tense and exciting as it draws nearer to the climactic battles and such. However, I felt that by the time that was done, it got a bit rushed and ending was just *okay* for me. (view spoiler)

The world-building wasn't that complex, but very extensive and imaginative - everything from how the governing bodies of both the North and South Woods worked, the Mystics and the whole Periphery magic (I

think that was what they called it) that keeps most 'Outsiders' out. Although the whole animals in actual clothing and speaking like humans reminded me a lot of Bedknobs and Broomsticks for some unfathomable reason, I liked that some of the minor characters were given personalities and most of the cast in this book was pretty likable.

Even if the supposed antagonist fell a bit flat for me and were pretty generic/dime a dozen kind but hey, at least I could understand the main villain, Dowager Governess' motivations for why she was planning to carry out her eeeeeeeeeevil plans which was a plus. I don't know, I guess sometimes I get annoyed that the villains are lazily written in the sense that they are evil *just for the sake* of being evil.

Overall, I do recommend this to everyone, even if the fact that book is over 500+ pages. Okay, maybe it was just the copy I borrowed but nonetheless, don't let that deter from reading an actually good story!

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### **Leona Carstairs says**

Real Rating: 3.5 stars

While this wasn't a perfect read by any means, it certainly was an enjoyable one. A highly enjoyable one. The overall familiar yet unique feel of this novel felt like I was coming home to a childhood favorite, but discovering something new along the way. The writing was also a wonderful aspect, and I really appreciated it. It was just really fun overall!

Now that I've pointed out the great things about *Wildwood* let me outline some...not so great things. Firstly, it felt overlong to me. Not simply because the length of 540 pages is a little alarming for a children's novel, tbh it dragged a bit at parts. And second of all (while we're pointing out faults) it was a bit predictable. I think that's a problem with Narnia-esque books (or sometimes MG in general) I can predict things sometimes, and I never like doing that.

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### **Sarah says**

*EDIT: I decided it really wasn't fair to compare this book with a TV show that came out after it. Also the second book in the series was a big improvement on this one and made me like it a bit better.*

Prue McKeel is a twelve-year-old from Portland, tasked with watching her baby brother while their parents spend the day at the craft fair. Prue transports baby Mac in the little red wagon hitched to her bicycle, and the infant is carried off by crows. Prue follows the crows into the woods, right to the edge of a fantastic waste called the Impassable Wilderness, where no one is supposed to go.

But Prue wants to rescue her brother, so after conning her parents with a lump of blanket shaped like a baby - the most transparent trick baby since Kronos swallowed the stone he mistook for Zeus - she bikes away the next morning, into the woods. She is accompanied by her classmate, Curtis, a nerd with a fairly obvious crush on her, though *why* he likes her is anyone's guess.

In the woods, they are quickly confronted by bipedal, clothed, musket-toting, talking coyotes, who attack them. Prue escapes but Curtis is captured.

Curtis is taken to the Dowager Governess, who reigns over the coyotes. She plies him with blackberry wine and adopts him as a son instantly, drafting him into the war she wages against the bandits of the wood.

Prue, meanwhile, meets a friendly mailman and gets shipped to the Governor's mansion in a more civilized part of the Wood, where she has a friendly chat with a giant talking owl who promptly gets arrested. While on the run from a similar fate she falls in with the bandits, who take her to see the mystics, so they can stop the Governess - who of course was the brains behind kidnapping the baby - from sacrificing the infant to an invasive vampire plant, which once fed on human blood will destroy the entire Wildwood.

I had to keep a running list of all the things that this book stole from, or at least reminded me of:

- The Chronicles of Narnia, especially *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *The Silver Chair*, and *Prince Caspian*. Things stolen: talking beasts, evil sorceress who preys on the insecurities of young boys, blood sacrifice on a stone ruin, heroine followed into the forest by annoying boy from school, trees that turn the tide of the battle.
- *The Wee Free Men* by Terry Pratchett. Things stolen: kidnapped baby brother, prepubescent heroine on quest, evil queen who stole the baby, fantasy Scotsmen who steal things.
- *Labyrinth*. Things stolen: kidnapped baby brother, heroine on quest, sorcerer who kidnapped the baby, talking animals, cowardly but ultimately helpful old man.
- *The Trolls* by Polly Horvath. Things that overlap: Pacific Northwest setting, little brother lost in woods, possibly haunted woods.
- James Cameron's *Avatar*. Things stolen: Governing body that has to sit around a semi-sentient tree and meditate before deciding anything. Much environmentalist pontificating that detracts from the story.
- *The Lord of the Rings*. Things stolen: "The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!" Also, Prue lifts a line from Aragorn at one point.
- *Macbeth*. Things stolen: the trees at the end. Although those could just have easily come from LOTR or Narnia.

Needless to say, that's both a long list and a mostly good one. Unfortunately, while Meloy imitated the superficial trappings of these works, their spirit evaded him.

C.S. Lewis might be one of the best writers the English language ever produced, with his immaculate sentence structure, his evocative imagery, his professorial fourth-wall breaks, his barely-described but internally consistent characters, and his vast knowledge and love of mythology and Scripture that holds up the structures of his own stories. The Narnia books especially are shaped by the horrors of WWII.

Conversely, *Wildwood*'s prose, while literate, is swollen with too many words, many of which can be found nowhere but in a thesaurus. The characters are inconsistent and remote, and there is no deeper meaning underneath. No Aslan emerges to give his life for the kids and the wood. This is not the stuff that epics are made of, and it saps the final conflict of the punch it was meant to have.

Edmund Pevensie never forgets that he made the war worse by going to the Witch, and that his actions under her influence brought about the death of Aslan. He grows into a “quieter, graver man” than his brother Peter, humble and of sound judgment. Curtis Mehlberg arguably causes more damage to Wildwood than Edmund did to Narnia – taking lots of bandits out with a cannon – but neither he nor anyone else seems to remember this. At the end of the book, he unironically says “We lost a lot of bandits in this war,” as if he had nothing to do with that.

Pratchett's writing style was in the same great British tradition as that of Lewis, and Tiffany Aching is one of the finest heroines YA offers. She's spunky without being aggressive, brilliant without being a know-it-all, no-nonsense but never mean. She squares off with a faerie queen, but unlike the Dowager, the Queen just wants a baby for company; Wentworth will probably be neglected once the capricious Queen gets bored of being a mom, but no one is going to murder the child. You know, because infanticide doesn't really belong in a light-hearted middle-grade adventure.

Compared to Tiffany, Prue is negative space, a girl-shaped cardboard cut-out in hipster clothes. We are told at the beginning of the story that she draws birds, listens to vinyl, does yoga, is a vegetarian, likes lattes, and is finicky about her jeans—I'm sorry, her *Levi's*—being the exact right shade of indigo. Meloy thinks these are character traits.

Also, the Nac Mac Feegle could wipe the floor with the Wildwood Bandits any day. “Ye take the high road an’ I’ll take yer wallet!”

*The Trolls*, *Labyrinth*, *WFM* and (to a lesser extent) *LWW* all show an older sibling learning to value an annoying younger one when the younger one is imperiled: Sally, John and Edward to Robby; Sarah to Toby; Tiffany to Wentworth; Peter to Edmund (developed more in the movie than the book). This theme is absent in *Wildwood*. Yet Prue isn’t particularly tender with little Mac either. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference...

The comparison to *Labyrinth* doesn’t hold up beyond the superficial similarities of the plot. Prue is a child, comfortably ensconced in her upper-class hipster existence; Sarah is in her mid-teens, anxious about growing up, angry at her parents for divorcing, and stuck in an affluent but apparently loveless home. Jareth has nothing in common with Alexandra beyond being a magician, and he forms an interesting contrast with both her and Pratchett’s Faerie Queen in his treatment of the stolen child. The Goblin King is a great babysitter and a lousy tyrant: most *Labyrinth*-dwellers might not even know who their King is, whether they have a king, or what is a king. He never bothers them, preferring to lounge on his throne or stalk Sarah in owl form. *Labyrinth* is not actually a kids’ adventure story, but a gothic semi-romance following the Hades/Persephone template that, for reasons best known to itself, features singing goblin muppets.

I can’t be certain if Meloy “borrowed from” *The Trolls* since that book is not exactly well-known. Which is a shame, because there aren’t that many books I read in second grade that I remember now and am still stunned by how good they were. The novel is episodic and remarkably short, surreal and sometimes hilarious but ultimately somber. Unlike the other works on this list, this one might not technically be a fantasy, since one is never sure whether or not the titular Trolls are literally real, or the semi-hallucinatory manifestation of human envy and greed. At 135 pages, you can fit four *Trolls* inside *Wildwood*.

The stuff borrowed from *Avatar* is but the culmination of a problem that runs throughout the book: Meloy's modern, affluent perspective screaming its presence at inopportune intervals and ruining the illusion of timelessness that he's trying to create. Of the works we discussed above, *Narnia* and *Labyrinth* take place in their present days or not long before (the 1940s and 80s, respectively), while *Trolls* has a present (1999) frame story with flashbacks to the 70s-80s where most of the action occurs. (This doesn't apply to *WFM*, which takes place entirely in an imaginary setting that satirizes high fantasy and steampunk in equal measure).

But while Lewis uses the vernacular of the time, he never references sports, big band jazz, or popular movies—he doesn't even mention WWII all that much. Henson and Co. make their heroine deliberately untrendy, with her long straight hair, baggy hippie clothes, and preference for reading and solitude; the male lead's anime hair, flouncy shirts and slim-fitting leggings are admittedly more dated, but he's more of a throwback to his actor's 70s glam rock days than a true 80s hair-metal bodice-ripper pretty boy. *Trolls*, likewise, has only a scant handful of grounding references and the present age of the main character to date it by.

My point is, the hipster pabulum spouted by Prue, Curtis, and occasionally even the narrator is going to age this book terribly. It's as annoying as Cassandra Clare trying to show off her knowledge of urban teen subcultures and looking like that one friend's mom who tries way too hard to be her child's "friend"; it's like Rick Riordan referencing Hillary Duff in *The Lightning Thief* or writing a thinly-veiled fictional version of Gerard Butler into *The Lost Hero*. Scholastic has to reissue the Animorphs series every five years or so to update the pop culture references.

Returning to *Wildwood*, Meloy's insertions have a political tang to them largely absent in Clare, Riordan and Applegate, which makes them doubly annoying. When Prue rudely snaps at her mother "I'm a vegetarian; ergo, no bacon" (pg. 2), the narrator seems to find her justified, and to share her belief that meat is yucky. I have absolutely nothing against hipsters or vegetarians, but the snobbery in this particular book bugs me. Eat whatever you want, but don't look down your nose at people with different diets. Later comments about expensive jeans, yoga, and vinyl records raise the question: Do any actual kids care that much about these things, or is this hipster adult projection?

For someone who comes so dangerously close to plagiarizing Lewis, you'd think Meloy would've noticed that the only Narnia character who sounds anything like his two protagonists is one Eustace Clarence Scrubb; in fact, Curtis' explanation of his pacifist beliefs (pg. 101) is mighty similar to Eustace trying to whine his way out of a duel with Reepicheep in Chapter II of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The thing about Eustace - who when we first meet him enjoys reading about grain elevators, has an absurd amount of faith in the British government, and regularly ingests something called Plumptree's Vitaminized Nerve Food – is that he's *meant* to be an idiot. After a traumatic experience, he becomes a dramatically different kid. Funny how the many scary things that happen to Prue and Curtis never stick to them. In short, if you want your MCs to be likeable, pre-dragonized Eustace is the last person you want them to sound like.

I haven't even gotten to the supporting characters, so let's hear a bit about them now:

-Brendan the Bandit King: the leader of a ragtag band who live in the wood and terrorize merchant wagons. I like him well enough, but he's not developed much.

-Iphigenia the Mystic: an old magic woman who does old magic woman things. She is the chief priestess tending the Avatar tree that tells the Wildwood mystics what to do. She can also talk to plants—in a memorable scene towards the end, she convinces a great mass of blackberry plants to move off the road for

the bandits and militia. The soldiers stand around for half an hour waiting for her to finish this instead of simply cutting the plants down with the many sharp implements at hand. They had precious little time to reach the place where the Dowager intended to kill Mac, but Goddess forbid they trample some plants.

-Owl Rex: a giant Great Horned Owl, who stands as tall as Prue, Owl Rex is the Crown Prince of the Avian Principality. He is the rightful ruler of the Wildwood's birds, but the crows broke away from him to serve the Dowager instead. Easily the second least offensive character in the ensemble, Owl is arrested shortly after being introduced and then disappears for three hundred pages.

-Richard: a cowardly but ultimately kind and helpful old man who drives an arcane mail van through the North Wildwood. He becomes friends with Prue, calling to mind both Tumnus from *LWW* and Hoggle from *Labyrinth*. Note that both of those characters betrayed (or almost betrayed) their young female friends, and were forgiven, but forgiveness is a theme and Meloy doesn't like those. So, no fall from grace and mini redemption arc for you, Richard!

-Governor Lars Svik: a weaselly, ineffective leader, whom we know is weaselly and ineffective because the narrator and the characters often tell us so, although there remains no evidence that Svik is any more incompetent than the average soulless bureaucrat. His secretary, Roger, gives strong Wormtongue vibes. I suppose Roger shows up in a sequel, because while teased as sinister, he does nothing here.

-Septimus the Rat: the only character in the group that I can truly say I liked, Septimus lives in the Dowager's dungeon, befriends Curtis once the latter turns against Alexandra and is imprisoned, and helps the boy, the bandits, and Dmitri the turncoat coyote escape. Septimus is cool because he actually seems like a rat, rather than a human in a rat's body. He's sneaky, always hungry, and his scope of comprehension rarely goes beyond what he wants to eat at the moment. His line, "It feels good on my teeth," becomes a running gag.

-Dmitri the coyote: No development at all. He used to work for the Dowager, now he doesn't, no personality. All the coyotes have Russian names, and Alexandra and her late son Alexei are probably named after the last Tsarina and her son.

-Alexandra, the Dowager Governess: could have been a strong villain given a little development. Her tragic backstory is easily the best part of the book. Perhaps a novel targeting older readers and focusing on the clockwork boy and his crazy mother would have yielded better results for Meloy. I wouldn't even mind reading the sequels if this plot thread reemerges and becomes important. But I have no particular hope for that.

As is, Alexandra is scary but can't hold an icicle to her obvious inspiration—Jadis, one of the most terrifying villains in fantasy when you tally her list of crimes and their magnitude. I'm also not sure how I feel about the white, redhead Alexandra affecting the costume of a stereotypical "squaw." You would think that a writer as PC as Meloy would consider this "cultural appropriation" or at least a bit too close to the romanticized "white savage" trope.

I'll close with a few quick points.

- 1) I have never used the word "similar" so frequently in a review. *Wildwood* uses its literary tradition for a crutch, even if it looks down its nose at its predecessors.
- 2) Each of the books/films/TV shows I compared it to has an underlying archetype from mythology or the Bible, that inform its symbolism and ultimate meaning:
  - *LWW*: The Passion and Resurrection of Christ
  - *Labyrinth*: Hades and Persephone
  - *WFM*: Just a changeling myth, but Hades and Persephone and Orpheus and Eurydice figure into its second sequel, *Wintersmith*
  - *Over the Garden Wall (see below)*: *The Divine Comedy*
  - *Trolls*: Joseph and His Brothers

Let the reader take note that those four old stories have a fair amount of shared imagery: seasonal change, characters entering caves or falling down holes, journeys into the underworld, prophecy, separation from and reunion with family, forgiveness. Most importantly they involve death, real or perceived, and resurrection.

*Wildwood* really ought to follow along these lines, but doesn't.

If you like Americana fantasy and/or folk art, watch *Over the Garden Wall* instead. This Cartoon Network miniseries features emotional depth, character growth, flashes of great dialogue ("My name is Greg" "Hi Greg, I'm Beatrice" "My brother's name is Wirt" "Who cares?") actual suspense, symbolism, a world you can really wander in, and economic, well-paced storytelling. When a 110-minute, episodic cartoon with musical numbers is better at basic storytelling than a 541-page, third-person past-tense novel—let alone this much better—a that cartoon is inspired, and b) something's really wrong with that book.

Read *The Trolls*. Read *The Wee Free Men*. Check out *Labyrinth*.

And if by some crazy circumstance you still haven't visited Narnia, get yourself those books as soon as you can.

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### **samm says**

I first picked up this book because, I cannot lie, I love the Decemberists. After cracking open the first couple pages I was swept into the seedlings of a great adventure. The world created by Meloy is so close to our own yet so far apart. It takes place in the "Impassable Wilderness" of Portland. And by the end of the book I was thinking if I went to Portland I too would be able to find this magic forest existing today just beyond my imagination.

It has everything I love: adventure! birds! animals! wise old women! friendship! family! I'm quite an outdoorsy person myself, so I really loved all the nature that is so perfectly and accurately described for the setting of this story. I think any kid that is into hiking, camping, and exploring the natural sciences will really love this book. (Adults too!)

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## Lily says

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I know an emoticon is not a review, but ...

There is nothing right about this book.

For one, it is ridiculously boring. The pacing is awful--by the end of the first half (so 300 pages in), it felt like absolutely nothing of import had happened. The characters are bland and unlovable, which is key when you're writing a timeless (read: totally stereotypical) fairy tale.

The plot often doesn't make sense. Now, I'm not saying that everything has to be explained--I don't care that some animals talk, and some don't, and that this totally eco-friendly alternative society still somehow has advanced technology like cars and guns. No big. But other questions that I can't reveal because they would spoil the clunky plot stand glaringly unanswered at the end.

Stereotypes. Everybody is a stereotype. Crows and coyotes = bad. Owls = wise. Farmers = stupid. City folk = rude. Spunky young girls = good. Nerdy little boys = the hero, even if Prue is ostensibly supposed to be the heroine. Hippie old women = nonviolent to a fault. Part and parcel with stereotypes come sexism. We have the "bereaved mothers are evil" line that we often see in fairy tales. I don't get it, Meloy. You make a big stink about ladies being able to fight in this alternative world, and then you make Prue silly, dull, and weak, and the Dowager Governess a baby-crazy psychotic. We call that "lip service." Go read some Irigaray.

The illustrations are beautiful, I will say that. And Meloy does know some beautiful, obscure words. But they are not enough to make up for the totally bla story.

tl;dr: This book is boring and sexist. Don't bother.

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## Daven says

What an enjoyable read this was.

I confess to entering into this novel with conflicting feelings. I attended a young adult literature conference back in October. As we were getting settled in to listen to the keynote speaker (no less than Mike Lupica, not to drop names or anything . . . ), I caught glimpse of a confusingly familiar face moving across the periphery of the large, crowded room: *Isn't that Colin Maloy of The Decemberists?* I thought. *Yeah, right, and he'd be at a young adult literature conference in Naperville, Illinois . . . Uh huh.*

Well, gentle skeptics, I met Colin Maloy of The Decemberists that day, along with the very talented illustrator and wife of Maloy, Carson Ellis. This fine YA fantasy, Wildwood, is their collaborative effort, which of course I snatched up and marched over to their signing table with. I didn't let on that I knew of his other life, as the frontman for one of my most-admired bands. I'm a near-50-year-old slightly grizzled father of three; it's not flattering to gush in such a condition. Plus, I considered it thoughtful of me to let him bask in the relative anonymity of a YA lit conference, where the heavy majority of attendees were middle school librarians who would've thought "Decemberists" was just a catchy term for people really into the upcoming

holiday season.

Now, would I have read this book, let alone purchased it, had it not been written by Maloy? Maybe. But, maybe not. I tend to repel as do opposite magnetic poles when it comes to YA fantasy. I try, believe me. But when fuzzy creatures begin to speak in clever tones, I recoil. My ability to heave that tonnage of suspension of disbelief just isn't present in these spindly arms of mine. So . . . a weighty dilemma now presented itself; gadzooks, Maloy had written a full-fledged fantasy, replete with (literally) armies of verbose forest inhabitants! I steeled myself with continuous listens of The Decemberists' wondrous "The King is Dead" CD, and dove in.

No, I wasn't fully taken in immediately, but skillfully and wonderfully, the world of Wildwood captured me. The story centers on the 12-year-old Prue, whose toddler brother is carted away from a neighborhood park by a murder of crows due to her momentary lapse in vigilance. The child disappears into the thick Impenetrable Wilderness across the Willamette River of Portland, Oregon. Prue frantically follows, taking readers fully into an alternate world, where contingents of creatures (both four-legged and human) vibrate between diplomacy and all-out warfare. Prue and her sort-of friend, Curtis, are quickly separated in the depths of Wildwood. Their storylines separate, and then gradually and dramatically intertwine again.

Certainly, there are elements of this novel that have been presented in past YA fantasies -- a cruel-minded Dowager Governess bent on ruling over the forest at whatever risk of bloodletting, whimsical animals who spar, cajole, and nurture, a flawed yet perfectly heroic rebel leader. (My favorite: a rabbit sentinel sporting a colander -- yes, a colander -- as a helmet, and closing nearly every sentence with a perfunctory "So." I grinned every time he spoke, bless his furry little head.)

But despite the familiarity of these elements, the novel possesses such charm and such three-dimensionality that I became very happily and very willingly "lost" in Wildwood. And the fringes of darkness in Maloy's writing prevents Wildwood from becoming merely a fluffy escape. (You want Maloy darkness? -- check out the lyrics to his "The Rake's Song" on the CD "The Hazards of Love" -- yipes . . . )

Reading Wildwood, I was a surrounded reader. For what better reason do we read? And so, in the closing pages, when Prue emerges from the wilderness, to return to the reality of urban life, much to her parents' joy, I was nothing but melancholy. I didn't want to leave. Toss me some trail mix, throw a colander on my grizzled head, and let me talk to the animals. I'm there.

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### **nicole says**

BOOOOORRRRRRIIIIIINGGGGGGGG.

It's a 541-page middle grade fiction fantasy that bored me to tears (except for one story about Prue's parents that was the only part I found interesting and I'd much rather have read about that for 541 pages). Meloy and Ellis call this work a love letter to the woods of Portland, Oregon, and a true collaboration between their work. And that's admirable and beautiful, but I tried to quit this book a hundred times, until I realized I had already read so many pages that I might as well see it through.

Why is this book so long? The most beautiful thing about The Decemberists - the reason that I was so excited to grab a copy of this book at BEA, despite not being able to get a ticket for the autograph session because really who wakes up that early -- is that they have these amazing, gravely songs that concisely (key

word, jot that down, it will be on the test) tell you a kickass story.

Exhibit A - The Mariner's Revenge. Eight minutes and twenty-five seconds to tell a perfect short story.

And it wasn't just the book's length that had me bitching and complaining. Let's take a look at Prue's babysitting session, page 4 of your uncorrected proof for those of you following along at home:

After several random errands (a pair of Levis, not quite the right color, needed returning; the recent arrivals bin at Vinyl Resting Place required perusing; a plate of veggie tostadas was messily shared at the taqueria) she found herself whiling time outside the coffee shop on the main street while Mac quietly napped in the red wagon. She sipped steamed milk and watched through the window as the cafe employees awkwardly installed a secondhand elk head trophy on the wall.

Yeah. Sooooo..... Prue is like nine years old. Or maybe eleven. Who are we kidding here? Who is this book for? I'll tell you that, it's not for any of the kids I worked with this past year in fifth and sixth grade. Even my voracious readers. And it's not for me, who actually knows who Colin Meloy is, and it's not for people who liked Narnia or Harry Potter or hiking or trees or anything. It's basically for people who love Portland, right?

I was sort of into the story's two adult heroes or villains, depending on whose side and what chapter you were on. They're called the Dowager Governess and the Bandit King, so you can just stop rolling your eyes thank you very much.

I'll listen to every Decemberist album that rolls out and fawn over Carson Ellis's lovely drawings, but read another book in this series? Never.

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### **Brigid ☆ Cool Ninja Sharpshooter ☆ says**

Oh my gosh, I loved this. A really good story, and beautiful illustrations!

Full review coming soon.

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### **Kirsten says**

Meh. I really liked the concept here: a sort of Alternate Portland with an Impassible Wilderness in St. John's, with the St. John's bridge as a ghostly portal. But I was pretty disappointed with the execution.

The language is often kind of overwritten and clunky. Prue and Curtis are not well-defined as characters; I wasn't even able to put my finger on how old Prue was supposed to be until she came right out and said she was twelve at one point. First I thought she was much younger, if precocious, but couldn't quite buy that if she was eight or nine she'd be babysitting her brother all day, unless her parents were of the negligent type. It almost felt as though her age changed throughout. Similarly, I had a hard time believing that, if Curtis was twelve, he would have been rejected by his classmates for his "babyish" habit of drawing superheroes -- from my recollection, 11 and 12-year-olds who can do a decent drawing of Wolverine or Spiderman receive a grudging respect for their talents, even if they're low on the totem pole.

Basically, the first thing a children's or YA author has to do with a child protagonist is establish them believably as a child, if a potentially heroic one, and Meloy fails to do so.

The frustrating thing about this book is that if you describe the individual elements to almost anyone who loves books of this type, their eyes will light up: children kidnapped by crows, disappearing bridges, bandits, evil sentient ivy, an Avian Protectorate, etc. etc. Yet it's all a bit hollow and unsatisfying, in the end. I really feel like this is a book that needed to undergo at least one more major rewrite before it was published, and I'm sad that it didn't, because I think it could have been much, much better.

On the other hand, I loved Carson Ellis's illustrations. She is AWESOME.

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### **Mayra Sigwalt says**

Wildwood me surpreendeu bastante. Primeiro por ser um livro infantil bem longo, são 500 páginas só de história (as ilustrações não são contabilizadas). E segundo por ser um livro infantil épico. No sentido de O Hobbit e As Crônicas de Narnia. O livro não foge da violência, da complexidade do texto (tive dificuldade com algumas palavras e aprendi várias) e de oferecer um sistema político e social. Nada aqui é mastigadinho pra criança e isso me deixou muito feliz. O legal da Prue - nossa heroína - e Curtis, é que eles estão descobrindo esse mundo, enfrentando-o da melhor forma que conseguem, mas ainda são crianças. Gostei muito de como o vilão da história é ao mesmo tempo mirabolante e realista. E que as coisas não são simplesmente preto e branco, o bem versus mal.

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### **Dasha says**

Really excellent. A proper review to come.

So, proper review - my main, shameful, criteria, for liking anything goes something like this: if I wish to have written, created, taken photograph, worn that item of clothing or thought of that - if I am a little bit jealous of not having come up with the idea - if I want to be the writer and the main character - that's what I love.

Wildwood made me feel both wistful for being twelve and reading it and pretending to be Prue and going on my own adventures, and also wistful for being Colin Meloy and Carson Ellis, wishing I had made it - the book is so beautiful.

Yes, there is sometimes a feeling that you've maybe read parts of the book before. Yes, it made me think of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe - but you have to understand that I LOOOOOVED that book - read it until the cover fell off - I still remember finding it in the library for the first time - it's seminal in my world view - and the fact that Wildwood reminded me of it actually made me like it more.

Get it for your 12 year old, for your 12 year old self.

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### **The Chuck says**

This is a delight of a young-adult book.

After reading a number of reviews here and on amazon, I can only add to the discussion that the largest complaints seem to be that the vocabulary is troubling and perhaps not age appropriate. To that I say, "Buy a dictionary, suck it up, and read better books." All the praise that has already been doled out sums it up: it's a great tale that's just different enough from everything else in the genre of kids' fantasy to be really engaging and delightful.

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### **Irmak says**

Sanki 500 sayfalık bir çocuk kitabı okudum ama bundan gram söylemedim. Evet çocuk kitaplarıನೇ ಸೇವಿಯುತ್ತಾರೆ :')

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