

YOUNG ADULT

A Decemberist's Tale of a Fantastical Portland

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WILDWOOD

The Wildwood Chronicles, Book 1

By Colin Meloy. Illustrated by Carson Ellis

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Portland, Ore., is an analog town, a city of bicycles and bookstores and Douglas firs and old pubs with splintery wooden bars and hulking industrial-era bridges. It's a town where the bookish, bewhiskered, occasionally bowler-hatted band members of the Decemberists can play perfect homegrown rock. Now the band's singer, Colin Meloy, has written a fantasy adventure set, appropriately, in the green heart of the city.

Within that heart lives a seventh grader, Prue McKeel, who resides with her parents and her baby brother, Mac, in a Portland neighborhood near a great tract of wilderness Meloy has imagined into being: "As long as Prue could remember, every map she had ever seen of Portland and the surrounding countryside had been blotted with a large, dark green patch in the center, stretching like a growth of moss from the northwest corner to the southwest, and labeled with the mysterious initials 'I. W.'" The initials stand for Impassable Wilderness, a terrifying place that Portlanders barely speak of, let alone visit.

If they have the choice. But one day while Prue is minding 1-year-old Mac, a murder of crows swoops down and kidnaps him into the Impassable Wilderness. Doughty, brave-hearted Prue realizes there's only one thing to do: head into the wilds and save the baby, Y.A.-style.

Folding elements of real-life Portland into the story, Meloy lovingly describes the jungles to the north and the cobbled streets and elegant tree houses of the more civilized south. The result is a richly satisfying weave of reality and fantasy.

Into this hybrid world, Prue journeys forth with Curtis, a geeky schoolmate she reluctantly acquires along the way. Cycling into the forbidden woods and towing Curtis behind her in his Radio Flyer, Prue quickly discovers that the seeming wilderness is very inhabited indeed. Locals include a vicious coyote army, an avian diaspora, a gang of Robin Hood-like bandits and a citified population of prosperous animal and human burghers.

But things are not entirely rosy in the woods. The evil widow of the former ruler is plotting a takeover. The animal factions face escalating conflicts. As Prue and Curtis search for baby Mac, they find themselves crucial players in a political drama dating back decades. In the end, these troubles can be resolved only in battle, and Prue must rise to the occasion. She sets off to meet her destiny by bicycle: “Never in Prue’s life had she been so focused on her riding, so tuned in to every churn of the pedal assembly.” Bicycle heroism: it doesn’t get any more Portland than that.

Sometimes things get almost too Portlandy, as though the characters from the brilliant TV satire “Portlandia” have gotten lost in Narnia. Picture Fred Armisen squinting from behind his glasses as he smugly informs the killer coyotes that he’s actually, you know, a pacifist.

The illustrations, too, have an elegantly homegrown feel. In fact, they sprouted very close to home. The illustrator Carson Ellis, whose drawings have graced “The Mysterious Benedict Society,” is Meloy’s wife. Her work toggles between graphic, quirky miniaturism and a sylvan majesty well suited to these pages. (In case Meloy and his family don’t seem talented enough, note that his sister is the novelist Maile Meloy.)

One problem: the plot occasionally slows to the speed of a 1974 Schwinn. This is presumably the first book in a series, and there’s a lot of setup. But mostly Meloy’s efforts pay off. He has shaped the real stuff of Portland into a fantastic epic with a rainy, bicycle-riding Northwestern heart.

Claire Dederer, author of the memoir “Poser,” lives on an island near Seattle.