

BOOK REVIEWS

At the Gate of All Wonder



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About the Book

- **Author:** Kevin McIlvoy
- **Reviewed By:** Elizabeth Boyle
- **Genre:** [Fiction](#)
- **Publisher:** [Tupelo Press](#)
- **Published:** 2018
- **Pages:** 239

Book Review



North Carolina has four national forests: the Nantahala, the Pisgah, the Uwharrie, and the Croatan. The Pisgah National Forest, established in 1916, is the oldest of these and, at over 500,000 acres, the second largest. It is home to parts of the Blue Ridge Mountains, white-water rivers and waterfalls, hundreds of miles of trails, and, of late, the characters in Kevin McIlvoy’s fifth and most recent novel, *At the Gate of All Wonder* (Tupelo Press, 2018). Specifically, McIlvoy has set the novel in the Pisgah Ranger District of the forest, although it might be most accurate to say, simply, that *At the Gate of All Wonder* takes place within the strange and awesome soundscape of the woods.

The story itself belongs to narrator Samantha Peabody. Samantha Peabody, as she sometimes refers to herself, is an eighty-year-old bioacoustician, who has been living alone in the Pisgah for twelve years. Eccentric, honest, foulmouthed, wonderfully perceptive (and sometimes not at all), she longs so much to be loved and to love that she can hardly stand it. While the novel features an entire cast of characters with distinct voices and interwoven stories, it is Sam’s voice, most of all, that makes this odd, heartbreaking, often very funny book worth reading.

In form the novel resembles a journal, although Sam also describes the pages as, among other things, her “dark memory album,” “witch-fire,” and “fabular confessions.” Writing in 2016, she reflects on the adventures she had in 2003 and 2004 with two children, siblings, who had enrolled in her SONIC ADVENTURES WITH SAMANTHA PEABODY enterprise. Over the course of that year, the children, referred to for much of the novel as “the one” and “the other,” accompanied her on monthly, week-long camping trips in the Pisgah that were centered around listening activities. It is to them that Sam is writing. At least some of the time. She also admits she isn’t always quite sure to whom she is writing—or for whom. “Why would I wish for you two to read this?” she writes in parentheses, “I am never sure I am writing this for you. For you I take things out, for me I put things in.” Accordingly, within her monthly entries, she alternates between addressing her two former students in second person and writing a more “typical” first-person narrative. Even when we’re not, Sam seems to be learning, we’re always writing for someone.

At a glance, one can’t help but compare *At the Gate of All Wonder* to Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. In Robinson’s novel, Sylvie Fisher watches over her two young nieces, Ruth and Lucille, in Fingerbone, Idaho. In McIlvoy’s, Samantha Peabody supervises eight and six-year-old Betty and Janet just outside Asheville, North Carolina (Sam does allow herself, eventually, this small happiness—to use the children’s names). Both novels consider the long-term effects of loneliness and loss, and both explore that precarious line separating eccentricity from . . . something more than that, something from which both authors also seem to be asking: is it possible to return? And yet, the two novels are so distinct in tone and style that to compare one to the other also seems unwise. Though riddled with references to various literary and musical influences—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*; Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*; songs from the likes of Little Walter and Louisiana Red—*At the Gate of All Wonder* is uniquely its own.

So much so that it can take some time to warm to. Not many people speak or write the way Samantha Peabody does. Recalling her first sonic adventure with Betty and Janet, for example, Sam writes:

The first week in October all the forest crown-limbs clattered and fallen pine needles broomed the surface roots. We could hear one crisp leaf falling a hundred and fifty feet through skeletal tulip tree branches and one bit of loosed bluff-stone grumbling and crunching against a rocky part of the path behind us. The ashen clouds were darkening, as I had wished: a threatening hour to be lost. I had explained to the two child-things that this was the time of the orographic phenomena of thunder without rain.

Her way of speaking is similarly unusual. “Who talks that way?” Sam’s sister, Elaine, says to her later in the novel. But the resulting cadence of the text is precisely what makes the book noteworthy. Over and over, Sam asks Betty and Janet the same question: *have you heard?* McIlvoy, too, is asking the reader this question. Whether it is attuning one’s ear to Sam’s particular way of conversing or trying to hear the sounds of the forest as Sam describes them, reading *At the Gate of All Wonder* is an exercise in learning, anew, how to listen.

In this way, *At the Gate of All Wonder* is also a novel that questions where the limits of literature lie. What, truly, do we hear when we read about crown-limbs clattering and bits of bluff stone grumbling and crunching? *Do* we hear? Or do we simply remember what we have once heard. “Sound, a natural syntax,” Sam writes, “asks to be reheard whenever it is ‘read.’” How different, though, is hearing from rehearing? To what extent, in other words, can literature hold within it sensation? Samantha Peabody’s dark memory album might not answer these questions, but it certainly invites us to wonder what is possible.



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