



THE HONEY BUS:

A Memoir of a Girl Saved by Bees
by Meredith May,
Park Row Books/
Harper Collins, 2019.

Bees are familiar with what happens when they open a hive -- the sense of calm and focus that comes on a good day as their cares dissolve. It's a sensation difficult to explain to a non-beekeeper, who is mostly concerned with whether one gets stung. Here is a book that embodies that restorative experience by recounting the writer's true story of her relationship to the bees with a kind grandfather that healed her as a child.

Meredith May's nonfiction writing during her sixteen-year career at the San Francisco Chronicle garnered prestigious recognitions, among them from PEN USA, the Society of Professional Journalists and the Associated Press. Her series about an Iraqi boy wounded during the second Gulf War was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize. She has subsequently been a professor of journalism and podcasting at Mills College.

All that is said to contrast the conditions she rose from, which held little if any promise. When her parents divorced, her mentally ill, abusive mother brought the young Meredith and her brother to Carmel Valley, California, to live with her own mother, a grandparent who showed little compassion for the children. The man the children knew as their grandfather was the one person who treated them with love and respect.

The Bees That Keep Us

Reviewed by M.E.A. McNeil

In this telling, we are past the nostalgic time of the elder beekeeper who knew nothing of mites. This man is real, and the reality of his presence with the children and with his bees is in stark comparison to the bewildering dysfunction of the other adults in their lives. The writer remembers, "I was starting to get used to the impermanence of people, of places, of promises."

The moment that Meredith discovered that her Grandpa is not her biological relative but a step-grandfather was one of confusion, until he responded: "Pinch my arm.... Hard as you can...Do you feel skin?" When the children nodded, he concluded, "I'm real. I'm your grandpa." What else was real was the bees. They must have been grounding, too, for Grandpa, a fourth generation beekeeper from a pioneering Big Sur family, who put up with an irascible wife.

Meredith was fascinated by the old engineless Army bus parked in the yard, a Chevy half-ton that housed Grandpa's extraction equipment. "Now that I was six, and had gone up two shoe sizes, I was campaigning hard for admission." She hung around it until she was at last permitted into its inner sanctum. As its jury-rigged pumps and pipes were explained, she became part of a refuge with "the aroma of vanilla, butter and fresh dirt." There, she was in a world that made a new kind of sense. "The whir of the extractor sounded like the hum of a colony...If we were at either ends of the bus, we had to wave and dance like a bee to get the other's attention."

"His workshop held a Willy Wonka-like spell over me," she writes. Her curiosity was fostered by his kindness, and she was soon enough suited up to accompany him on outings to his hundred or so beehives. Those forays are accompanied by Grandpa's explanations of what they were seeing when they opened a hive, which somehow escape sounding didactic, even though he is teaching the reader as well. "Over time, the more

I discovered about the inner world of honeybees, the more sense I was able to make of the outer world of people."

This metaphor, cheesy in another context, works because the behavior of the bees as little humans is seen through the eyes of an all-but-motherless child. "Even bees need their mother... Bees act like people sometimes -- they have feelings and get scared about things."

The naiveté of the child's voice is contrasted with writerly attention to detail. Sights, smells, sounds enliven her experience, and a network of factual information holds it all together. For example, "sugars" caramelizing on the hot capping knife are plural, as a beekeeper would know that honey is comprised of more than one kind of sugar.

Given the first jar of honey she'd helped extract, Meredith recalls, "The honey glowed in my hands, like a living, breathing thing. It was warm, and I loved it because it made sense when nothing else did."

For many of us who keep bees, it is their demise that unsettles us. This book is a reminder of what is steady about the bees, what is reassuring, even healing for us all. Meredith's young heart breaks with her mother's erratic volatility and mends with her life among the purposefulness of the bees. "All this time I thought Grandpa and I were the ones taking care of the bees. When all along, the bees were the ones taking care of us."

NOTE:

"A Tour Inside Grandpa's Honey Bus," a video taken by the adult Meredith May of her grandfather's old Army bus can be seen at <https://meredithamay.net/blog/page/1/>. Scroll down.

M.E.A. McNeil is a journalist and Master Beekeeper. She just completed an MFA in narrative nonfiction writing at Mills College, where she won the Teppola Nonfiction Writing Prize. She lives on a small organic farm in Northern California with her husband and youngest son. She can be reached at mea@onthefarm.com.