

Firstborn,' by Tor Seidler

By Lenora Todaro

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“The glint of wolves’ eyes in the night is a chilling sight. If I’d been wingless, I would have been terrified.” That’s Maggie, the lively magpie who narrates Tor Seidler’s artful and affecting new novel, “Firstborn.” As it turns out, those eyes belong to wolves who, improbably, become her family. Together, led by the fearless Blue Boy, wolves and bird journey to the remote Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park where, they hear, an abundance of food awaits them. In the valley — where gray wolves were reintroduced 20 years ago, nearly a century after hunters drastically reduced their numbers — they will birth pups, raise and lose progeny, challenge other wolf packs and re-examine their loyalties to themselves and one another.

Seidler is a masterly teller of tales about society’s foibles — the kind that feature humanized animals, in the tradition of Richard Adams’s “Watership Down,” or Roald Dahl’s “Fantastic Mr. Fox.” It’s an approach that gives young readers emotional distance to reflect on difficult life choices or scary events. In novels like “The Wainscott Weasel” and “Mean Margaret,” a National Book Award finalist, Seidler’s animal characters are nonconformists who speak and feel and love across species, and whose antennas for loss are keener than most. In “Firstborn,” Seidler adds a nod to environmental stewardship, slyly showing that even the most well-meaning program to relocate animal species is complicated: The wolves’ population grows, a national park is reinvigorated, but a generation is torn from its families — and ranchers gripe that the creatures will turn their cattle into prey.

Maggie narrates the novel from her airy perch above “the poor earthbound creatures.” The eldest bird-child in her brood — a firstborn — she seeks an original life, and laments her common name: “Here I was, a minute-old magpie, with a mother named Mag and a father named Max, and they were calling me Maggie!” She finds the adventure she aches for when she crosses paths with Blue Boy, a wolf who had been collared and penned in Yellowstone as part of the wolf reintroduction plan and then escaped by digging his way to freedom. Maggie follows Blue Boy, scouting prey for him. Together, they pick up a new family of wolves: Alberta, the flirtatious, maternal alpha female; Lupa, the petty underling female; and Frick, the second male, whose knowledge of medicinal herbs saves them more than once.

Seidler has a crafty way of making the reader feel like one of the pack: When the wolves issue a howl “so soul-stirring that I swear the moon quivered in the sky,” you want to join them. But this is a pack whose main characters also want to follow their own paths, a social situation that will resonate with young readers. “The thing is, it’s hard to be different and the same at once,” a crow says to Maggie early on. These firstborns shake off eldest-child responsibilities, but not without paying a price.

Maggie abandons her own mate to follow Blue Boy; when he dug his way out of the Yellowstone wolf pen, Blue Boy abandoned his brother, whom he must face later in the story; and Lamar, a firstborn pup of one of Blue Boy and Alberta’s litters, leaves the pack to romance a coyote, a subversive act since “wolves and coyotes don’t mix.” The strain upon Blue Boy and Lamar’s relationship nearly tears the pack apart. Their quest for survival breeds suspense, but the moral terrain they travel concerns being true to oneself and reckoning with family.

“Firstborn” is dedicated to Jean Craighead George (1919-2012), the great naturalist writer for young readers who Seidler says introduced him to Yellowstone’s wolf life. George’s magnificent “Julie of the Wolves,” the 1973 Newbery Medal winner, tracks an Eskimo girl lost in the Alaskan tundra who survives by mimicking the ways of a wolf. But where George developed human characters who use their knowledge of nature alongside the animals they love, Seidler creates animal characters who have humanlike consciences. And where George made the Alaskan tundra as tangible as her Julie, Seidler uses Yellowstone’s sulfurous hot springs and bubbling caldrons mainly as a stage for the action. He’s a storyteller first, not a naturalist, and at times “Firstborn” strains under the weight of homage.

But Seidler’s storytelling instincts prevail, and he inspires swells of empathy toward the wolves, while keeping real the violence that is a part of their nature. I know the story of these wolves and their magpie pal worked on me. Driving one day not long after I read the book, I had to pull over when I saw two squirrels sniffing the body of a third, who had been killed by a car. As Seidler’s wolves mourn and feel loss when pups are killed by fire, ice, and owl, so too here were creatures grieving for a lost companion, or so I was convinced.