

A CHILD OF NATURE

by Heather Conn

She was an extraordinary little girl who loved the woods, who heard fairy voices and who talked to the trees. With whimsy and passion, adventure and mischief, she revelled in every new discovery of nature's secrets.

Her name was Opal Whiteley, and her rediscovered diary, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow* (Warner Books New York), has been hailed as "one of the great forgotten books of 20th-century America." This ingenuous account, overflowing with curiosity and energy, is filled with a rich sense of oneness and remarkable child's-eye-view insights: "One drinks in so much inspiration while one is dabbling one's toes in a willow creek." Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh* author who resurrected the diary in 1986, calls Opal "a communicative genius - a creator of spontaneous, lilting delights."

Opal was six when she started her diary, printed in quirky crayon strokes on scraps of paper that she hid in a hollow log in the woods. It was 1903 and she lived in an Oregon logging community named Walden. Her life was filled with daily excursions through the forest where she chatted with the fir trees and "lichen folks," sneaked food to her "very dear pet mouse" Felix Mendelsson, and hid animal friends, from frogs to earthworms, in her pockets. She gave special names to all her favourite creatures and solemnly called William Shakespeare, an old grey horse, "an understanding soul."

Absorbed in a world of outdoor enchantment, Opal often delayed her chores or found new, inventive ways to help her frazzled mother; once, she proudly used glue to do her mother's

spanking. Such punishments puzzled Opal: "I think grownups are queer sometimes," she wrote.

Many found Opal's mystical imagination too strange to understand. "She was always a queer girl," her grandmother said in a 1920 newspaper interview. But thousands recognized the teenage Opal's deep attunement to the natural, wild world and brought their children to her public lectures and classes on the outdoors; she became an esteemed mentor of nature's magic.

It was an editor at *Atlantic Monthly* who recognized Opal's brilliance and

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inspired the publication of her diary. Since her original journal scraps had been torn to pieces, this involved the arduous re-pasting together of almost a million paper fragments: butchers' bags, wrapping paper and backs of envelopes - all scrawled with a six-year-old's phonetic spelling.

The *Atlantic Monthly* serialized parts of this outstanding diary, upholding it as "a revelation of the spirit of childhood." Its publication sparked a sensation and for a year, Opal became a media darling.

But within a year, the book was out of print with Opal's fame tarnished by public rejection. She had written blissfully of her original "angel parents," claiming that she was adopted. When this proved false, critics speculated that the diary was a fraud. Besides, could a little girl write with such profound knowingness of the

charging that Opal had written it as a knowing young woman, not a guileless youngster. Although editor Ellery Sedgwick had verified the diary's description of people and events and their approximate dates, she was accused of participating in the alleged fraud for personal gain and profit. Yet experts analyzed the diary's fibre content and confirmed that the paper was indeed of pre-First World War vintage.

Nevertheless, gossip and rumours spread until readers were embarrassed even to have a copy of the diary; they felt duped by Opal's captivating anecdotes. Reporters clamoured for an investigative story, producing distorted facts and evidence. Harassed by the media, Opal's four siblings changed their names and moved away.

Discredited and ostracized by literary circles, Opal wound up in a public hospital in London, England where, by 1986, she was reported to be in failing health. (This writer was unable to find official confirmation of her death.) It is now believed that from early childhood, Opal displayed symptoms of what would currently be called schizophrenia.

Once dismissed and disgraced by a world too blind to true beauty, Opal's words remain today to celebrate the outdoor splendour she shared. Their simple grace and innocent joy will not be confined to obscurity. As her six-year-old voice beckons: "Now I think I shall go out the bedroom window and talk to the stars. They always smile so friendly. This is a very wonderful world to live in."

Heather Conn offers Oneness in the Wilderness outdoor programs for children age 7 to 9; the next activity will be held