



A Fine White Dust

Cynthia Rylant

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How much do you have to give up to find yourself? When Pete first sets eyes on the Man, he's convinced he's an ax murderer. But at the revival meeting, Pete discovers that the Man is actually a savior of souls, and Pete has been waiting all his life to be saved.

It's not something Pete's parents can understand. Certainly his best friend, Rufus, an avowed atheist, doesn't understand. But Pete knows he can't imagine life without the Man. So when the Man invites Pete to join him on his mission, how can Pete say no -- even if it means leaving behind everything he's ever loved?

A Fine White Dust Details

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From Reader Review *A Fine White Dust* for online ebook

Claire Zheng says

"A Fine White Dust", by Cynthia Rylant, is a book about a boy who's extremely passionate about Christianity. He meets a traveling preacher and looks up to him immensely, and the two decide to leave town together to continue spreading the religion. But the preacher ends up leaving without him, and Pete learns to set aside his passion once in a while and appreciate his family and friends. To me, this book was okay. The plot was alright, but I felt it to be a little bit boring. Just not engaging or exciting as others that I've read. The intro and ending bit was really good though, and it was a fine read overall. I'll only recommend it to people who are invested into Christianity, I guess.

Gale says

"Self Sacrifice for Personal Growth"

Thirteen-year-old Pete relates the poignant summer events which helped him come of age. Seems like all his life he has been fascinated with the Church—just waiting to be dramatically Saved. But why are his parents just superficial Christians; how can he justify to himself or a serious adult being best friends with a cocky atheist? And why can't he bring himself to throw out of the dusty shards of a ceramic cross which he has hidden in his bureau drawer—in frustrated grief?

Ah, well, that was the Summer of the Revival: of confessions, revelations and hope for salvation. Pete's parents are only vaguely aware of his private turmoil. One thing is for certain: that the traveling Preacher Man had one Hell of an influence on this naïve youth—who just wanted to serve the Lord by spreading the Word. It sure would be hard to sacrifice home and friends to follow in That fellow's footsteps. Was Pete really ready to take to the road as a modern fisher of men? What about family loyalty? It comes to a true rug of war over responsibility. Oh yes, what happens to the title dust?

This book is a short, intense read concerned with teenage obsessions, adult foibles and the gradual dawning of gratitude for supportive parents and faithful friends. Pete grows to appreciate the simple joys in life, like happy memories and the view from his bedroom windows. Still he agonizes over how best to serve Jesus. However this introspective story does not drip with piety; rather, it relates a youthful quest for truth and trust. Literary tension increases as Pete is waiting to sacrifice his sheltered life in order to start a new one with a doubtful future. A fine undercurrent of suspense keeps readers hooked. Atheists—fear not, for there is no attempt to convert. It's not religion per se which the author examines, as much as human response, human dreams and failings. As the back cover asks: "How much do you have to give up to find yourself?"

(June 9, 2012. I welcome dialogue with teachers.)

Laura says

Ryland does a great job telling a compelling story in little over 100 pages. The subject of religion and revivals (and how our faith is sometimes affected by the people we meet) would certainly make for good discussion. I have to admit, though, that I was creeped out by the main character's obsession with the evangelical preacher. It was like he, at 13, was in love with Preacher Man. Somehow, fire and brimstone mixed with the hint of homosexuality hit a little too close to home here in the South for me!

Kirsten says

This is an extremely brief book that sort of expands in your head once you've read it. It's a deceptively simple story: Pete, a thirteen-year-old boy who is discovering his Christianity, meets an itinerant revival preacher, who sweeps him off his feet with his religious fervor. Pete decides to leave town secretly with the preacher, feeling called by God to carry out His work. While making this decision, Pete is forced to deal with his less religious parents, as well as with his openly atheist best friend, Rufus.

I thought the whole thing was carried out beautifully. The preacher's irresponsible behavior is treated as the dangerous actions of one man, not as an indictment of Christianity, so this isn't by any means an anti-religious book. Instead, it's about humanity, and one boy's growing and changing faith. I definitely think it deserved the Newbery Honor it received, although like many of the Newbery books, I think it's a fairly specific audience that is going to draw a lot from it the first time they read. I think it's the kind of book that will stick in one's head, though, as it's stuck in mine.

Linda Lipko says

No stranger to writing award-winning books, Rylant hails from the Appalachian mountains and many of her books have a small-town, back woods feel to them. Fundamental religion is part and parcel of Appalachia and while the setting of *A Fine White Dust* is a tiny town in North Carolina, threads of Rylant's history appear to be woven throughout.

Dealing with teen aged obsessiveness and the need to worship and honor a hero, Rylant creates the character of 13 year old Peter Cassidy who longs for a heavenly relationship with Jesus.

Drawn to religion since he was very young, Peter cannot understand his parents and best friend who do not attend church. When an itinerant preacher sets up shop and holds well-attended revival meetings, Peter is drawn like a moth to the flame.

As the crowds weave together, sweat rolling down their face, arms in the air, chanting their new found freedom from sin, Peter knows he belongs. Honoring God, but primarily worshiping the Preacher man, in a cult like fashion Peter attends each and every revival meeting, fainting at the altar at the feet of the Preacher as he gives his life to Jesus.

Packing his bags, willing to leave behind parents who love him and a solid friendship with a friend named Rufus, Peter agrees to be led like a lamb to follow Preacher man.

When Peter discovers Preacher man is not what he appears to be and that talking and doing are two separate things, Peter faith and spirit are temporarily broken.

While this is not a Newbery book I particularly recommend, I did like the theme of hero worship destroyed and the need to carefully analyze what is required from those we follow. The author creatively examines misplaced loyalty, friendship and family.

Katie Fitzgerald says

This review compares two short, religious-themed middle grade novels from the 1980s: *The Glory Girl* by Betsy Byars and *A Fine White Dust* by Cynthia Rylant.

Plot

The Glory Girl is about a family of gospel singers, all of whom can carry a tune except for the main character, Anna. Poor Anna has a terrible voice and no rhythm, so whenever her family performs, she is relegated to the back of the room where she is expected to sell as many tape recordings of her family's music as she can. This arrangement, along with her father's generally unpleasant attitude, leave Anna feeling left out and lonely much of the time. This changes, however, when her Uncle Newt is suddenly paroled and sent home from prison. Though he initially doesn't show up to meet his family upon his release, Uncle Newt lingers on the edges of their lives, occasionally interacting with Anna, who finds in him a kindred spirit who understands her feelings of isolation. When her family is involved in a serious accident, Anna turns to Uncle Newt for help, hoping he might be able to rescue her family and also reclaim his own place in it.

A Fine White Dust is about a thirteen-year-old boy with a strong sense of religious fervor. Though his parents are not believers and his best friend is an atheist, Pete can't help but feel drawn to church, and to the Man, the preacher who comes to speak at the revival. From the moment Pete comes forward to be "saved," he feels an undying love for the Man, whom he credits with bringing him closer to Jesus. As his love for the Man grows, Pete decides he will go with him on the road to bring God's word to others, only to find that perhaps the preacher is not as wonderful - or as honest - as Pete has imagined him to be.

Each of these books has a compelling plot, and they both involve outsiders who are looking for an adult figure to help them feel a sense of belonging. While Pete's relationship to the preacher seems more likely than Anna's kinship with the uncle she barely sees, I was more comfortable reading about Anna and Uncle Newt than I was with Pete and the preacher, who makes me uneasy, mostly because of how Pete almost equates him with God. Both books are tightly plotted and very short, leaving little room for unnecessary events. Of the two, though, *The Glory Girl* is more outwardly exciting, while *A Fine White Dust* is more emotional and personal.

Characterization

Both Byars and Rylant are excellent at writing well-crafted and utterly credible characters. I think I felt more sympathy for Anna Glory, partly because she is a girl, but mostly because I could understand her longing to be a part of the family singing group. I didn't feel the same sense of understanding with Pete, as the kind of Christian worship he participates in is very far removed from what Catholics do (it reminded me of the film *The Apostle*) and I can't really understand his desire to participate in it. I did, however, believe fully in his desire to participate, and to be as close to the Man as possible because of the good feelings associated with

his acceptance of Jesus at the revival. I felt bad for both characters, but Rylant does a better job of making me feel what her character feels even when I have never felt that way myself.

In terms of secondary characters, I think the strongest across both books is Pete's best friend, Rufus, who comes through for him time and again even when Pete hasn't been especially nice to him. There aren't a lot of scenes with Rufus, but what is written gives a really good sense of his role in Pete's life and of the close nature of their friendship. The accident-prone twins in the Glory family were also really appealing and their dialogue was funny and sounded like real brothers who both insult and defend each other in the same breath. But I also thought they were pretty similar to other boys in other Byars books.

Treatment of Religion

A Goodreads review of *The Glory Girl* suggests that Betsy Byars hates religious people. I didn't get that sense at all. Yes, the Glories are religious, and their father seems to have a bit of a chip on his shoulder, but I didn't take that to mean he was zealous in a negative way or that the accident was a punishment or comeuppance from God meant to show the error of his ways. Rather, the book is about two things: the way disastrous events can change a family, and the way outside influences might help a misfit child realize there is more to life than the group where she doesn't quite fit. This book was much less about religion than it was about a family that happened to be religious.

A Fine White Dust deals entirely with religion, but again, not in a negative way. Even when the truth about the preacher comes to light (which, by the way, is not as dire as my attempts to avoid spoilers make it sound), Pete is able to distinguish between the failure of a man and the failure of God. Pete also becomes more willing to look with kindness and fairness upon those who don't share his faith after the events of this book. I actually thought the story would make a great jumping-off point for discussing the ways people can manipulate belief in God to suit their own purposes, and for warning against false prophets.

Quality of Writing

The writing in both of these books is spare and concise, which I love, and I think this approach suited both stories really well. I am biased toward Betsy Byars, as I love so much of what she writes, but this was not her best book, and Rylant really writes beautifully as well. I especially like the way her story comes full circle, using the image of the fine white dust (the remains of a cross Pete has broken in anger) to show Pete's change of heart after his brief friendship with the preacher. I could definitely see the distinctive qualities that would lead a Newbery committee to recognize this book.

And the winner is...

It's close, but in this match-up, I think the winner is *A Fine White Dust*. The writing is really strong, the rise and fall of the story really lovely, and Pete's emotions come across really strongly. *The Glory Girl* is also really good, but I think *A Fine White Dust* has more depth and will stick with me longer.

This "book battle" review also appears on my blog, *Read-at-Home Mom*.

Queeshon says

I like this book because it was funny but true cause it was talking about hell and heaven and different features

in the book how it was being explained.

Tamara York says

Newbery Challenge 120/512. I love Cynthia Rylant's books, but I did not love this one. It follows a 12 year old boy who is super religious and is worried about the souls of his atheist best friend and his parents who don't go to church. A revival comes to town and with it the hitchhiking loner Preacher Man. The protagonist falls in love (no other way to describe it) with the Preacher Man and makes plans to run away with him. Preacher Man doesn't show up and takes a local girl with him instead. The boy's best friend is there to pick up the pieces. I think this story is supposed to be about friendship. I like to think it's also about not judging others' belief systems. But I couldn't get past the over-the-top evangelical main character and the super creepy Preacher Man. How is it okay to plot to run away with a 12 year old?!? Don't recommend.

Christine says

A touching, powerful book. In a mere 106 pages, Peter makes the journey from naive "believer" to a more mature spiritual place.

Shelly says

I went to the library today, and the book I wanted to pick up was already checked out. I had two young children with me, so I didn't want to wander the stacks aimlessly looking for a book to read. Instead I just headed down to the children's area. It was story time. I looked around the Newberry Award section halfheartedly and grabbed this one. I've been reading a lot of nonfiction lately, so I thought a good bit of juvenile lit would be good for me. This one was especially appealing because it was short (~100 pages) and it has a nice title. When will I learn to completely disregard titles???

I guess it had interesting moments, and I thought it left a lot open to interpretation. Some people probably think it's anti-religion, but I don't think that is necessarily the case. I just thought it was a little bit weird. The preacher seemed creepy to me, and I was almost expecting him to be a pedophile. I knew that could not be the case or it would be the most horrible book ever. (Read: young boy becomes enamored with a traveling preacher, runs away with him, and gets abused. This is not the plot of this book, just what the plot might end up being if the preacher really was a pedophile. See? It just doesn't work out to be a good plot line.) Even so, the preacher man seemed creepy and a little too interested in a thirteen year old boy.

Do I regret the 45 minutes I spent reading this book? Not really, but I'm still wondering why this book was a Newberry Honor winner.

Sharon says

This book served as a wonderful distraction during several of my recent exercise sessions on the treadmill

(and I needed the distraction, believe me). I picked up this audiobook on a whim at the Green Valley Book Fair (<http://www.gvbookfair.com>) several years ago. It is a well-deserved Newbery Honor Book. The protagonist in the book is an 11-year-old boy named Pete who becomes totally enamored with a traveling evangelist who comes through their town one summer. The Man ends up inviting Pete to leave everything he knows and run away with him to continue the business of "saving" souls. Will Pete go? Should he go? I'll let you read the book to find out the answer for yourselves. My husband and I both love this young adult novel. Being from the South, (which is the setting of the book), we recognize the characters. It makes us both feel as if we're on familiar, if not holy, ground. However, I think the subject matter and some of what could be insinuated into the motivation for some of The Man's behavior might make the novel more appropriate material for high school students as opposed to those in Junior High.

On another note, I do recommend listening to the audiobook version of this novel if you can find it. Keith Nobbs does a wonderful job handling the narrative.

Melinda says

This book packs a lot in a few pages. Peter's search for faith, truth and religion takes him on a most interesting journey as he meets and interacts with a traveling preacher. I appreciated the process of how easily Peter rationalized leaving all that was familiar behind to accompany the traveling preacher; this is precisely the justification young teens employ when facing such a dilemma. I equally liked the unconditional relationship between Peter and his best friend, Rufus; many valuable lessons learned from this one.

Larissa Langsather says

This is an odd book. I think I was expecting a mystery (I don't know why) but what I got was story about a boy who is religious and full of intense emotions. He believes God is calling him to abandon it all and follow "Preacher Man". The preacher ends up not showing up when they had agreed to leave and Peter falls into a full on depression for a week. His best friend, Rufus, helps bring him out of it and the author leaves the book pretty open ended.

For the first time in my reading history I WANTED a homosexual relationship to blossom. I feel like anything I have read about homosexuality (which granted isn't much at all) it is some kind of agenda or shoved in my face or kinda gross. This book felt like Peter and Rufus could genuinely love each other and have a committed relationship (if that was acceptable). In any case, I was surprised by my own feelings toward the two boys and I don't even know if that was what the author intended because it is a children's book after all written probably on the cusp or right before "GAY PRIDE" was all over the place. But I could be totally wrong and this is just an innocent story about a boy and his thought process in small town with no intention of any kind sexual or otherwise.

I loved Peter's parents and I loved how he ended up really finding the good in the situation after the whole "Preacher Man" incident. I teared up on multiple occasions near the end. It was a nice short read that will leave me in my thoughts for awhile.

Michael Fitzgerald says

A bit predictable, but generally good.

Sara Williams says

A Fine White Dust follows our main character Pete who has devoted himself to God and to church since a very early age even though he doesn't necessarily come from a religious family. One day his whole life insight change when a man he calls 'Preacher Man' arrives in his town.

The story is very brief and certainly never gets to the core.

Personally, I had no clue what the story would hold when I got to it but it seemed to me as it was mostly, very flat.

The execution was supposed to contain some higher moral about how to treat life but after stumbling upon the last couple pages, my reaction was a mere 'meh' because honestly, not much can be said about it at all. I would have wished the family connection had been further explored and also the friendship aspect.

Nevertheless, the writing is very beautiful and engaging, and I might pick something up by the author again.
