

This selection is a review of the book *Jim the Boy* by Tony Earley.

Sweetness and Life

by Gail Caldwell

Jim the Boy is the starkly sweet story of a boy's emergence into adult consciousness, and its arrival on the current American literary landscape is somewhat akin to a rainbow appearing over an industrial park. Next to the woes and grit of much of contemporary fiction, Tony Earley's first novel feels stunned by innocence-uncluttered, untainted, focused only upon capturing a particular purity of experience. That it is set in rural North Carolina during the Depression only enhances this sheen. The world rendered here was a place of almost unthinkable simplicity, when darkness was merely a cloak of night that covered you from dusk to dawn, and when a new catcher's glove-intoxicating with its leathery smell-could be the most important thing that happened to you all year.

② Earley is a Tennessean whose story collection, *Here We Are in Paradise*, was widely admired, and his attention to physical description-to the sky's infinite display, or the elegant design of creeks and valleys-has a Southern cast, both in its straightforward acceptance and in its careful regard. It is a place of beauty and insulation to which young Jim Glass awakes each morning, and this sheer confinement, in Earley's hands, angles the novel's vision to a

crystalline perspective. The epigraph here is from *Charlotte's Web*, which tells you everything you need to know about Earley's intentions: This will be a story of understated grace, where less is more and where bad things are made tolerable by the presence of love.

The bulk of the story takes place over the course of a year in Jim's life, beginning in the summer of 1934, when he has just turned 10. The boy's origins were less than auspicious: His father and namesake dropped dead of a heart attack while working in the cotton fields a week before the child was born. Jim's mother, Cissy, has never recovered from this young heartache-her husband was 23 when he died-and lives now with her son and her three older brothers on their farm in Aliceville, N.C. The McBride men-Zeno, the patriarch, and Al and Coran, the interchangeable wisecracks-are middle-aged bachelors; their protectiveness toward Cissy is rivaled only by their adoration for their nephew. Born in the shadow of a funeral, Jim has carried the essential job of hope from the day he arrived, and you can feel this tender burden throughout his story-through all his uncles' gruffness and teasing and taciturn kindness. The rest of

the townfolk assume a similar concern for the child

Nothing all that complicated happens in *Jim the Boy*, . . . only the pitch and timbre of life itself, with its infinite echoes and whispers. Jim hoes a corn patch and the new school opens and a boy named Penn Carson, from up on the mountain, says hello one day-and with these quiet events, Jim is given windows into trust, knowledge, and the power of friendship. He watches a lizard's heart beating in the palm of his hand, and he learns how to hit and throw a ball; when his uncles take him on the road, he glimpses the cruelties and unpredictable whims of fate that happen all the time.

⑤ Most of these teachings are given to us by fact and not interpretation, for Earley has chosen in his narration to mirror the simplicity of his plot. Not for him the bossy instruction of an interfering omniscience; better just to throw the new baseball and let it lie there uncaught, representing love and failure and near everything in between. There is no ironic distance between Jim's consciousness and Earley's depiction of it; nor, for that matter, between Jim's and our own. The trick and fineness of *Jim the Boy* is to transport the reader to the early glimmerings of wisdom-the

days in youth when the world actually began to make some kind of thematic sense, simply because of what you perceived. It's not always easy to remember such primal education, of course: the day when hurt translated into caution, say, or shame became a highway marker for the path toward responsibility. Jim stumbles through each of these human tasks with a wide-open heart and all the fallibilities of boyhood, guided as gently and silently by his creator as he is by his caretakers.

There's an argument to be made that you can't justify a story as pure and simple as *Jim the Boy* in this day and age: that the world awaiting young Jim Glass was far more complex and treacherous than Aliceville's mostly peaceful

offerings, or Earley's gee-shucks rendering of them. And it's true that the story's appeal—its journey from innocence to adulthood, with metaphors strewn along the road—is the same quality that informs most of young-adult fiction. But if the novel suffers from sentimentality, it is rarely because of Earley's pampering of his characters: After all, this is a story that opens with a dead father. Where Earley hits his own wall, it seems to me, is in his account of the natural world, which can strain for the poetic. Leaves don't whisper and skies don't ponder what color they are

Jim the Boy sets out to deliver a sliver of a pristine world through a young boy's eyes, and in this task it succeeds with equanimity. It

is, for the most part, engaging and finely crafted, with a control that gives its moments of wisdom an extra bang. And the slow, steady dawning of Jim's geographical insights assume a special poignance. . . . Standing on a hill overlooking his hometown, Jim "could not believe how little space Aliceville occupied in the world. . . . He realized that there was nothing he could do inside that circle that would matter much to anyone outside it."

That's a lesson more easily and humbly learned in the rural South than in the big city; it's also universal, whether you ever choose to discover it or not.

"Sweetness and Life," a book review by Gail Caldwell for *Jim the Boy* by Tony Earley. Published in the *Boston Globe*, August 13, 2000.

1. What is the **main** purpose of this selection?
- A to summarize the events of the story
 - B to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the story
 - C to entertain both old and young readers
 - D to teach young people how to grow up to be independent
2. Why is *Jim the Boy* referred to as a “coming-of-age tale”?
- A It describes life from Jim’s point of view.
 - B It begins just after Jim’s tenth birthday.
 - C It takes place over the course of one year in Jim’s life.
 - D It focuses on Jim’s passage from childhood to adulthood.
3. According to the entire review, what does the reviewer mean in the second paragraph when she says *Jim the Boy* is a story “where less is more”?
- A It is a short, but powerful novel.
 - B It reveals that even an ordinary life can be rich.
 - C It is more interesting than most young adult novels.
 - D It focuses on the challenges of growing up in the rural South.
4. Based on paragraph 5, which experience would the author **most likely** consider an example of a child’s “primal education”?
- A reading her first book
 - B losing her first tooth
 - C receiving a catcher’s mitt
 - D her first betrayal by a friend

5. According to the book reviewer, what keeps *Jim the Boy* from being overly sentimental?
- A Jim’s uncles are gruff and like to tease him.
 - B The story is set in 1934 during the Depression.
 - C The town of Aliceville is not as peaceful as it seems.
 - D The story begins with the death of Jim’s dad.
6. According to the review, which word **best** describes the plot of *Jim the Boy*?
- A exciting
 - B realistic
 - C simple
 - D suspenseful
7. What is the universal lesson the author refers to in the last paragraph?
- A Each person is a very small part of a vast world.
 - B Events in rural America are fairly unimportant.
 - C The simplicity of rural America should be appreciated.
 - D Life in the city requires a humble attitude.
8. Based on the context of the first paragraph, what does the author suggest about *Jim the Boy* when she compares its publication to “a rainbow appearing over an industrial park”?
- A It is more beautifully written than most contemporary fiction.
 - B It has colorful and simplistic characters.
 - C It emphasizes purity and innocence.
 - D It takes place in rural North Carolina.
9. What does the author admire most about Earley’s narration in *Jim the Boy*?
- A his realistic portrayal of life’s harsh lessons
 - B his use of Southern dialect and patterns of speech
 - C his skill in communicating the feelings of each character
 - D his skill in letting Jim’s experiences speak for themselves

10. According to the book reviewer, what is the *main* weakness in the novel *Jim the Boy*?
- A Nothing very exciting or complicated happens.
 - B The rural setting is unrealistically perfect and isolated.
 - C It is too similar to other young adult fiction.
 - D The natural world is described too poetically.

End of Set

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EOC English I Sample Items

Selection Title	Question Number	Correct Answer	Thinking Skill	Objective Number
Sweetness and Life	1	B	Analyzing	4.03
Sweetness and Life	2	D	Analyzing	5.01
Sweetness and Life	3	B	Analyzing	5.01
Sweetness and Life	4	D	Generating	4.03
Sweetness and Life	5	D	Analyzing	4.03
Sweetness and Life	6	C	Analyzing	5.03
Sweetness and Life	7	A	Analyzing	4.03
Sweetness and Life	8	C	Analyzing	4.02
Sweetness and Life	9	D	Analyzing	4.03
Sweetness and Life	10	D	Analyzing	4.02