



2002

### Nelly in the Wilderness

Cathleen Alton

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Cullen, Lynn. *Nelly in the Wilderness*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2002. ISBN 0060291346. \$15.89. 184 pp.

Reviewer: Cathleen Alton

Reading level: Intermediate

Rating: Outstanding

Genre: Historical fiction; Fiction

Subject: Frontier and pioneer life--Indiana--Juvenile fiction; Remarriage--Juvenile fiction;

Stepmothers--Juvenile fiction

When Ma dies and Pa disappears soon thereafter, Nelly and her brother Cornelius try to stay alive in the Indiana wilderness. Even more threatening than possible starvation are the words of the Indian agent at nearby Fort Wayne: "Once a trapper's woman dies, the trapper's old family becomes a burden to him, so he goes off and starts a new one." Has Pa abandoned them? Their worst fears are realized when Pa comes home with a new wife. Margery is a pretty woman from the city, educated but unprepared to deal with the wilderness. Pa orders Nelly to teach Margery simple tasks like cooking and spinning, and she reluctantly complies, swearing that she will never accept this interloper. As Margery pluckily adapts to the rigors of things like cooking possum stew, she finally earns Nelly's grudging respect. Through various adventures Margery teaches Nelly compassion, love for beauty, and builds in Nelly the desire to learn to read.

Well researched, *Nelly in the Wilderness* convincingly portrays life in harsh circumstances, while sketching a common story-- that of the child fearful of losing love to a new family member. In *Nelly*, the picture is uncommonly well done, with original, believable characters, a memorable setting, and some humorous moments (as well as some sentimental ones) combining to add color and depth to this painting of American frontier life.