

Finding hope in butterflies

Dystopian tale weaves in ethics, wilderness skills

Portland artist and cartoonist Jonathan Case has quite the imagination. His latest novel, "Little Monarchs," presents a variety of ethical issues in the form of a tough little 10 year old's journal.

In the summer of 2101, 10 year old Elvi begins a journal to track the route that she and her caretaker Flora will take to follow the migration of monarch butterflies as they make their way along the Pacific coast of what was once the United States.

Fifty years earlier, a shift in the sun's radiation wiped out most mammals living on Earth by disrupting electrical systems governing their heartbeats. Only the mammals who were deep underground survived, and among those were a handful of scientists working in the sub-basement of a technical institute in southern California. These scientists were called "deeper," as they had to avoid the sun's rays and live deep underground during the day to survive. Flora's

parents were among them.

As Flora grew up, she built on the historical work of other scientists to try to find a way to protect the heart from "sun sickness," which, in the novel, causes a catastrophically irregular heartbeat. She develops a way to derive chemicals and make medicine from the scales of monarch butterfly wings, harvesting only a few from each insect so that they will not be harmed.

To ramp up the project and convert the medicine to a long term vaccine, Flora must ensure that monarch butterfly populations are healthy, which means that they need to have reliable and abundant stands of milkweed to feed upon along their migration route. By 2101, she is helped in this effort by Elvi, another kid of deeper. Elvi's parents had left their daughter in Flora's care while they tried to get to Michoacán, a forest reserve in the Mexican highlands where the monarchs make their winter home. But they haven't been heard from in years, so their dangerous journey may have failed.

Flora, now in her 40s, doesn't have a warm and fuzzy personality, but she nur-

This week's book

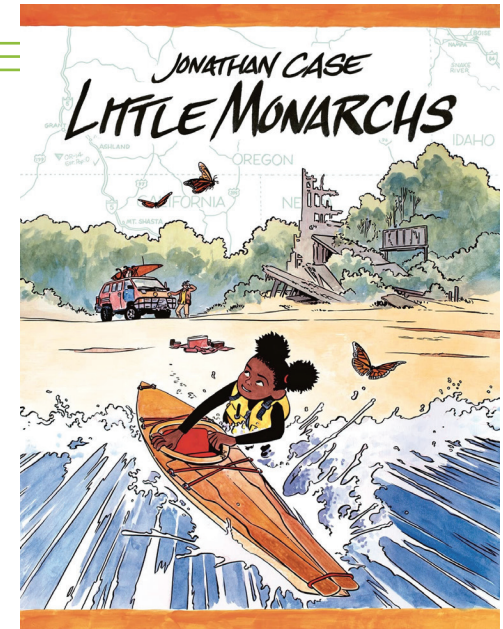
'Little Monarchs' by Jonathan Case

Holiday House – 256 pp – \$22.99 hardcover, \$14.99 paperback

tures Elvi in the best way she knows how: by teaching her survival skills and providing her with a makeshift education in the nearly forgotten glories of civilization, such as Shakespeare's plays, art, math, the scientific method and even manners, occasionally.

The pair trek along the West Coast, following the migration of the monarchs and tending the milkweed patches, performing the delicate operation of harvesting scales from butterfly wings and developing new batches of medicine in search of a functional vaccine. But their journey is fraught with peril. Accidents and natural disasters befall them. There are other "deeper" sites along the way, but after decades of isolation and deprivation, there's no way of knowing whom can be trusted. Flora and Elvi confront issues of disappointment and perseverance.

Case has created a gripping tale, investing it with ethical and emotional complex-



'Little Monarchs' is by Jonathan Case.

ity, but also studding it with geolocation and other wilderness skills. Loads of adventure and exploration await, from shipwrecks near Pacific City to caves in Colorado. "Little Monarchs" is top notch.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.

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