



The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate

By Jacqueline Kelly

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Calpurnia Virginia Tate is eleven years old in 1899 when she wonders why the yellow grasshoppers in her Texas backyard are so much bigger than the green ones. With a little help from her notoriously cantankerous grandfather, an avid naturalist, she figures out that the green grasshoppers are easier to see against the yellow grass, so they are eaten before they can get any larger. As Callie explores the natural world around her, she develops a close relationship with her grandfather, navigates the dangers of living with six brothers, and comes up against just what it means to be a girl at the turn of the century.

Debut author Jacqueline Kelly deftly brings Callie and her family to life, capturing a year of growing up with unique sensitivity and a wry wit.

The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate is a 2010 Newbery Honor Book and the winner of the 2010 Bank Street - Josette Frank Award. This title has Common Core connections.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Starred Review. Grade 5–8—A charming and inventive story of a child struggling to find her identity at the turn of the 20th century. As the only girl in an uppercrust Texas family of seven children, Calpurnia, 11, is expected to enter young womanhood with all its trappings of tight corsets, cookery, and handiwork. Unlike other girls her age, Callie is most content when observing and collecting scientific specimens with her grandfather. Bemoaning her lack of formal knowledge, he surreptitiously gives her a copy of *The Origin of Species* and Callie begins her exploration of the scientific method and evolution, eventually happening upon the possible discovery of a new plant species. Callie's mother, believing that a diet of Darwin, Dickens, and her grandfather's influence will make Callie dissatisfied with life, sets her on a path of cooking lessons, handiwork improvement, and an eventual debut into society. Callie's confusion and despair over her changing life will resonate with girls who feel different or are outsiders in their own society. Callie is a charming, inquisitive protagonist; a joyous, bright, and thoughtful creation. The conclusion encompasses bewilderment, excitement, and humor as the dawn of a new century approaches. Several scenes, including a younger brother's despair over his turkeys intended for the Thanksgiving table and Callie's heartache over receiving *The Science of Housewifery* as a Christmas gift, mix gentle humor and pathos to great effect. The book ends with uncertainty over Callie's future, but there's no uncertainty over the achievement of Kelly's debut novel.—*Jennifer Schultz, Fauquier County Public Library, Warrenton, VA*

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Growing up with six brothers in rural Texas in 1899, 12-year-old Callie realizes that her aversion to needlework and cooking disappoints her mother. Still, she prefers to spend her time exploring the river, observing animals, and keeping notes on what she sees. Callie's growing interest in nature creates a bond with her previously distant grandfather, an amateur naturalist of some distinction. After they discover an unknown species of vetch, he attempts to have it officially recognized. This process creates a dramatic focus for the novel, though really the main story here is Callie's gradual self-discovery as revealed in her vivid first-person narrative. By the end, she is equally aware of her growing desire to become a scientist and of societal expectations that make her dream seem nearly impossible. Interwoven with the scientific theme are threads of daily life in a large family—the bonds with siblings, the conversations overheard, the unspoken understandings and misunderstandings—all told with wry humor and a sharp eye for details that bring the characters and the setting to life. The eye-catching jacket art, which silhouettes Callie and images from nature against a yellow background, is true to the period and the story. Many readers will hope for a sequel to this engaging, satisfying first novel. Grades 4-7. --Carolyn Phelan

Review

Praise for The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate:

“The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate” is the most delightful historical novel for tweens in many, many years. ...Callie's struggles to find a place in the world where she'll be encouraged in the gawky joys of intellectual curiosity are fresh, funny, and poignant today.”— *The New Yorker*, “Book Bench” section

“In her debut novel, Jacqueline Kelly brings to vivid life a boisterous small-town family at the dawn of a new century. And she especially shines in her depiction of the natural world that so intrigues Callie... Readers will want to crank up the A.C. before cracking the cover, though. That first chapter packs a lot of

summer heat.”—*The Washington Post*

“Each chapter of this winning...novel opens with a quotation from ‘On the Origin of Species’—a forbidden book that her own grandfather turns out to have hidden away. Together they study Darwin’s masterpiece, leading to a revolution in Callie’s ideas of what she might accomplish on her own.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“Callie’s transformation into an adult and her unexpected bravery make for an exciting and enjoyable read. Kelly’s rich images and setting, believable relationships and a touch of magic take this story far.”—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

“Interwoven with the scientific theme are threads of daily life in a large family—the bonds with siblings, the conversations overheard, the unspoken understandings and misunderstandings—all told with wry humor and a sharp eye for details that bring the characters and the setting to life. The eye-catching jacket art, which silhouettes Callie and images from na...

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