



## The Boy of the Painted Cave

By Justin Denzel

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**The Boy of the Painted Cave** By Justin Denzel

Tao is an outcast. Unlike the great hunters of his clan, Tao does not want to kill the wild bears or woolly mammoths of the hunt. Instead he wants only to paint them. But only Chosen Ones can be cave painters. What's more, Volt, the clan leader, violently despises Tao. And when the other clan members discover Tao's secret talent, they cast him out into the wilderness alone. There, he befriends a wild wolf dog named Ram, and the mysterious Graybeard, who teaches him the *true* secret of the hunt.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Strongly reminiscent of Ann Turner's recent *Time of the Bison*, this too is a beautifully written story about an artistic prehistoric boy. Adopted as an infant by the kind old woman Kala, Tao does not know his father. His mother, Kala tells him, gave him his gift for seeing beauty "the thing that makes you different from others." Determined to paint, despite the taboo against it, Tao is gradually cast from the clan. Now on the outside, he begins to view their superstitions skeptically: demons do not dwell in the forbidden slough, after all; and the wolf dog, Ram, despised by the clan, becomes Tao's devoted friend. This is an exciting, fabulously descriptive story set against violent times. Denzel's knowledge of the Stone Age enhances the action; moreover, with his tender, somewhat melancholy insights into ostracism and loyalty, he transcends the period. Ages 8-12.

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From School Library Journal

Grade 4-8 Set 18,000 years ago in prehistoric France, this is the story of a 14-year-old boy who longs to be a cave painter. This is forbidden, however, because Tao is not a Chosen One—he's a tribal outcast with a crippled foot and no father to claim him. Forced into isolation by the superstitious leader, he befriends a wolf dog, Ram (another taboo), and the shaman, Greybeard, who teaches him to paint. When the tribe discovers this, they pit him against Saxon, the sacred bull. Tao is developed sympathetically, but his handicap is really a plot device to set up the central problem, for he has already overcome its physical drawbacks; it is the taboos and biases of his people over which he must triumph. The emotional connections between Tao and important minor characters are not conveyed strongly enough for readers to become involved and care. The motivations of the shaman are not always clear, and the cynicism he displays toward Tao smacks too much of a modern person sneering at savages, preventing readers from being swept up in the possible mindset of those who could believe in magic. There is no mystical wonderment at creation so beautifully evoked in Ann Turner's *Time of the Bison* (Macmillan, 1987). The taming of the wild dog is not as convincing as in Pryor's *Seth of the Lion People* (Morrow, 1988), which handles similar plot elements with more satisfying results, although both books occasionally use jarring anachronisms in their language. Despite its flaws, this book is interesting enough to introduce middle-graders to historical fiction. The superb cover will attract children, and, while the plot resolution seems a little forced, the exciting high points and the convincing setting will draw readers through. Annette Curtis Klause, Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries, Md.

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About the Author

**Justin Denzel** has been intrigued with history and caves for many years. As a young man he worked at the American Museum of Natural History, where he studied prehistoric cultures. Later, while training for the Army in the days before World War II, he explored the mammoth underground caves of Tennessee.

Mr. Denzel's first professional writing experience came in Alaska, where he wrote and edited a periodical, *The Alaskan*. During World War II he wrote for *Nature* magazine and for *Stars and Stripes*.

Mr. Denzel is the author of many books for young readers, including the well-loved **Boy of the Painted Cave**, published in 1988 by Philomel. He lives in Clifton, New Jersey, with his wife, Josephine.

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