



# The Water Seeker

*Kimberly Willis Holt*

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## **The Water Seeker** Kimberly Willis Holt

“When I was a boy, my pa dowsed to earn extra money when we had a lean year. And when he put the branch in my hands for the first time, I felt a burning inside me because I had the gift, too. Just be thankful I didn’t hand that gift down to you.”

Amos figured it was probably best not to tell his father that it was too late.

What would you do if you knew you had a special gift—a sixth sense—that was passed down from one generation to the next? A gift that could help people in times of need, but one your father often saw as a trap. Would you use that gift?

This is the story of Amos Kincaid, the dowser’s son.

## **The Water Seeker Details**

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Author : Kimberly Willis Holt

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# From Reader Review The Water Seeker for online ebook

## Donalyn says

This amazing book follows the story of Amos, a dowsers son, who travels along the Oregon Trail. You will become attached to the characters, rejoycing and crying along with them as the face the hardships of wilderness life. A masterful piece of storytelling and one of the best books I have read this summer.

Can anyone call the Newbery committee?

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## Zora says

A coming of age story set in the American west. This is not really a children's book and is definitely not one I'd recommend for a boy, despite the male protagonist. It has magical realism properties as well.

The writing is pretty, but the story was unbalanced, I thought. The more interesting bits happened in the second half, but some were played out too quickly, while duller bits in the first half should have been edited down.

I nearly subtracted another star for the poor conversion to e-book. The big 5 publishers overcharge for e-books and then don't spare two hours' proofreading cost to correct 100 errors like "per for mance" and weird line breaks. It's as if they haven't bothered to notice yet that e-book sales are beginning to beat physical book sales and keep treating e-books like the unwanted stepchild. Perhaps I should subtract the star...it's not as if the author couldn't get final approval of her own e-book written into the contract she signs, and if she had pride in her work, she would.

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## Sonja says

How I my heart got wrapped up in this magic-laced historical tale! Amos is a sweet, motherless boy who gets handed around, endures tragedy of many kinds, and has the ultimate adventure crossing the country on the Oregon Trail. I was delighted to find he would end up in my current backyard. Pioneer stories rock!

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## Marcilee says

I felt like this book, taking place during the westward movement era of our country, was close to a fantasy fiction story for me. Far removed from how I live life now in a large modern city with technology amped, I thoroughly enjoyed the simple and sweet way of life presented in The Water Seeker, with its yesteryear problems and pure relationships that ebb and flow and strengthen over years of working together. I liked learning about dowsing, which I hadn't thought much about before and want to explore more about how people used to find a water source during the pioneer days. Loved this tender book. Amos melted my heart.

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## **Margo Tanenbaum says**

Award-winning children's author Kimberly Willis Holt offers a lyrical coming-of-age story set against the harsh reality of pioneer times and the Oregon trail in her newest novel. The central character is Amos, born in 1834, the son of a dowser, or water-seeker. His father, Jake, has the mystical gift of finding water, a gift handed down from son to son in his family. His mother, Delilah, died while giving birth to Amos but appears repeatedly in the novel as a ghost visible to those women who care for her son. Because his father is away most of the year trapping and dowsing, Amos is raised by his childless aunt and uncle at an Indian mission. Amos is an unusual child who has inherited both his mother's gift for drawing and his father's gift for dowsing.

Life on the frontier was not easy, with a smallpox epidemic killing off not only a slew of Indians but also Amos' aunt, the only mother he has known. His care is given over to neighbors, until his father comes back to town with a new wife, Blue Owl, a Shoshone Indian. Amos, who wants to stay where he is, joins his father and Blue Owl in their itinerant lifestyle, until, a few years later, his father decides to join a wagon train to the Oregon territory as a scout.

The second half of the book tells the story of the journey on the Oregon trail; almost fourteen by this time in the story, Amos' journey takes him from a boy to a man. From the trail's jumping off point in Independence, Missouri, Amos' father recruits a diverse group of people for their wagon train, characters who will populate the rest of the book. Among them are a British family with a young girl, Gwendolyn, whose face has been disfigured by her father's abusive behavior. Also joining the group is a beautiful young girl Jubilee, her deaf brother, and her parents. Amos is enchanted by Jubilee, but Blue Owl knows that she is not meant for him.

Holt brings us into the preparations for this almost unimaginable journey--the purchase of supplies, the outfitting of wagons with oxen or mules, the decisions on which route to take, even the preparations of coffins of cloth, in case the worst happens. We see the travelers' distrust of Blue Owl; many had never seen Indians up close.

The action in the book steps up as the wagon train leaves for Oregon; terrible accidents, sickness, death, buffalo hunts, and young love are among the experiences that turn young Amos from a boy to a man. At the conclusion of the book, Holt takes us to 1859, when we see Amos, now with his own family, carrying on the family tradition of dowsing, "as his father had done, as his father had done before him...the gift never failed Amos."

This is a beautifully written, poetic tale that I would categorize as literary fiction for young readers. The book starts out with a very quiet, slow pace, and I can easily imagine many children abandoning the book after the first 25 pages or so unless they are required to read it for class. The story certainly would fit well into curriculum units on Western expansion, the Oregon Trail, and other pioneer themes, but the book does not have the action-packed pace that many children are accustomed to in other books. I do not see this book as having broad child appeal, but I can imagine that it might fare well in the awards season, since its more leisurely style may appeal to many adult readers of children's books.

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## **Tasha says**

I am struggling with the summary of this book. I could list all of the things that happen, but that doesn't

capture the wonder of this book, the tiny touches that make it so very special and the overlying theme of water and family that tie it all together. I could talk about the special moments but at its heart this book is the story of a boy who becomes a man before our eyes and builds his own sort of family out of the people he loves. It is the story of Amos, a boy who loses his mother the moment he is born, is loved by his father who cannot settle down and stay with him but makes sure he is cared for. It is the story of a mother's love that continues to guide, embodied in birds and reflections. It is the story of the Oregon Trail, of homesteading, of hardship and pain. It is the story of humanity captured in one boy's life. And I apologize that that is the best I can do for a summary, because it only grazes the top of this deep book.

I am amazed that Holt was able to put so much love, soul and power into a book that reads like an adventure story. It is a book that can be enjoyed on different levels, but is wonderful to plunge into and be carried away by like a strong river current. It is a book that celebrates all sorts of loves, doesn't turn away from pain and loss, and shows how life continues after devastation meets us. It is a story filled with strong women and men. Men who are both physically strong but also emotionally there. Women who shoulder the burden of entire families, survive horrific abuse, and continue to life and love.

Holt has created great characters here who are a joy to spend time with. Amos is a humble protagonist who grows into greatness. He is complicated, a wonderful amalgam of all who cared for him in his life. And yet at the same time he is simple and always himself. Holt manages to do both in this boy. And through it all runs a current of water. Water as life. Water as death.

Get this book. I am afraid I can't capture it any more clearly, because my words don't seem to be able to match the depth and power of this novel. It is amazing, wondrous and special. My Newbery pick so far.

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### **Gwen the Librarian says**

I really enjoyed this excellent and tender coming-of-age story about a boy and his relationship with his father, his yearning for a mother, and his adventure on a wagon train going to Oregon. While some mature young readers will enjoy the story, the harsh opening chapters tilt this read toward an older audience.

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### **Jess says**

It's moving story, with themes about family, belonging, growing up, and learning to see past the surface of things, set during the 1830s and 40s. It pulls you in, makes you care for characters, doesn't spare you any of the pain of loss or change, takes you across the country on the Oregon Trail, makes you feel fear and first love. It manages to feel gritty without much violence, and it makes history close and immediate.

But will any kids pick it up off the shelf? I know, I know - just because it won't get checked out like crazy doesn't mean there aren't readers who want and need stories like this. But it's one of those children's books that you could imagine published for the adult market with a few small changes. On the other hand, it really is about the experience of being a child - of dealing with change and growing up. Definitely recommended.

Source: I picked up an ARC at PLA.

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## Hilary says

The cover of "The Water Seeker" is outstanding. The book begs to be picked up and opened. And what an opening it is!

This fast-paced historical fiction adventure story for teens will have them living in the frontier world of Amos who endures the hardships on the Oregon Trail.

The author does an excellent job making her main characters and secondary characters seem completely authentic. You care about what happens to them. With a deft touch Holt manages to weave mysticism into the story without overdoing it.

"The Water Seeker" is one of those rare books I know I'll re-read and will find even more gems to relish. It's not for the squeamish. I highly recommend reading this tale and experiencing all of the highs and lows through the eyes of its memorable characters.

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## Destinee Sutton says

Gorgeous! Epic! Transporting!

One of my librarian colleagues took this book out of the running for our Mock Newbery early (back when the title was "The Dowser's Son") because of a couple lines right at the book's opening: "...he'd not been with a woman in a long time. Without thinking he said, 'Well, I reckon I could marry you.'" Out of context, I can see how this might make the book seem too mature for the Newbery age range (up to and including 14-year-olds). But I think this is a Higher Power of Lucky scrotum-esque fallacy. Adolescents are not necessarily going to read "been with a woman" as "had sex with a woman" so they won't necessarily go so far as to read that line as, "he was horny," which is how most adults would read it. Just like how kids aren't scandalized by reading the word "scrotum." Which is to say, I'm going to argue that this should *totally* be included in our Mock Newbery. In fact, it just jumped to the top of my list.

Now back to the actual book. I would put *The Water Seeker* in a class with *Anne of Green Gables* and *Sarah Plain and Tall*, i.e. excellent historical fiction about families and communities. They have drama, humor, and the fascinating details of an earlier time in history. They're beautifully written. The characters seem real enough to touch.

This story's hero is Amos Kincaid. Amos is born in 1833. His father is a beaver trapper, but he also has a special talent passed down to him from generations of Kincaids: he can find water in the ground. Amos inherits this skill, but it's a long time before he can use it.

Amos loses his mother at birth and is raised by a patchwork of communities: a minister and his wife at a mission near a Native American community, a family farm run by a widow and her six sons, traveling with his father and his new Shoshone wife, and on the Oregon Trail in a community of people seeking their fortunes out West. Along the way, the spirit of his mother follows him, almost haunting the women who come into his life.

There's so much in this story it's hard to believe it's just 300 pages. A sampling of the issues addressed: inheritance, domestic violence, racism, first love, death, what it means to be a family (or a tribe), and what it means to grow up and become a man. It's a beautiful story, filled with memorable characters, moments of joy and sadness, and a satisfying conclusion.

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### **Donna says**

This is a book that falls into the Children's genre. I'm not sure I agree with that. Not only is this a book that I wouldn't read to my children, I'm absolutely sure that my kids wouldn't want to hear this book being read or would even want to read it themselves.

I liked the story. It was original and contained the early American westward movement, which is an era I thoroughly enjoy reading about. But I'm not sure I completely embraced the fantasy element.

I liked Amos. His life was a hard one. The author created many characteristics that made him clearly stand out as the MC. I just wish some of the other characters felt as real.

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### **Diane says**

This book annoyed me. The story was fine - even good. But I was annoyed by the fakey mysticism - the image of Amps' mother appearing everywhere. And the birds - such a great chance to have good mysticism but she never did anything with them. And the dowsing - I thought that would be a major theme and metaphor but it just seems to be something she threw in at the beginning and end. And Amos' drawing. When Gwendolyn helps him draw pictures of people I thought, oh, now we are going to have an interesting development, but no - it just ends. It was as if the author had a bunch of good ideas and just threw them all into the book without any development. Very annoying. And I really don't need to read a book about teenage crushes on the Oregon Trail. A much better choice would be the Dear America book: West to a Land of Plenty: The Diary of Teresa Angelino Viscard.

I need to add, that one reason I was annoyed was that at the front of the book, the first thing you open to, is a beautiful map. I love maps in books. This one has all/most of the places on it that are in the book and it has lots of rivers identified. It gave me great hopes and probably set the bar too high. Actually, the author does a good job with places and rivers in the book.

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### **Mariah says**

Although the setting is very different from "When Zachary Beaver Came to Town", Holt once again explores the process one boy goes through to become a man. When his real mother dies in child birth, Amos is passed from woman to woman and each brings something important to his development. The story really takes off when Amos is 14 and begins traveling with his family on the Oregon trail. The crises he faces on the treacherous journey forces him to grow up and see people for what they really are.

While this book is interesting, it is slow moving and therefore hard to continue with. Also, Amos' mentality as a 5 year old is the same as a 14 year old, which is frustrating for me because it feels that his character

doesn't actually develop throughout the book. However, I enjoyed Holt's depiction of the mountain man life, life on the prairie, and the Oregon Trail. It is apparent that she did a great amount of research for this book through the descriptive settings and minor details of different characters lives.

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## **Jill says**

I'm not sure if I liked this book or not. I certainly enjoyed the plot (I'm a sucker for a storyline that uses the Oregon Trail), the characters, and the flow. Even the little magical bits. But it seemed to be missing something... bigger. I suppose the moral (for lack of a better term) was about growing up and becoming yourself, but this wasn't expressed strongly. I wanted a reason to read this, an ultimate "ah ha!" which I guess I didn't get.

I expected there to be more dowsing in this book, but it was mostly used as a way to kick start and end the book. It wasn't so much a disappointment as just something that made me go, "hmm" and later wonder why, but also, whether she could have used something else.

I wasn't sure what the point of the birds were. What did they symbolize? Yes, I know, that "mom" was hovering nearby. So once mom stopped showing herself to Blue Owl and Gwendolyn, why did they keep hanging around? What does water have to do with birds? Maybe I'm too dense to get it, but if someone on here has an idea, let me know.

The foreshadowing was pretty obvious - not too much to enjoy the book, but I knew every time someone was going to die (except one - but I can't tell you who without spoiling it!). Usually it was a pretty direct link: happiness = sudden death. That makes it sound depressing, and I think that Holt's greatest triumph was writing a book with so many sad events that was not actually sad (at least to me).

So, to sum up, the book had lots of weird little things that nag at me now that I'm looking back, but when I was reading it I was really enjoying it, and that's worth a LOT to me.

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## **Ivy says**

Here is a little diamond in the rough. Kimberly Willis Holt writes a coming-of-age story about young Amos Kincaid, born to an artist mother and a wandering father in early 19th century America.

The story is mostly about Amos and his family, the lives they lead and their experiences as a pioneering family. From the beginning, TWS sucks you right in. Holt spins her web masterfully, introducing you to her numerous characters and making them so real that you wish you had lived in their time. You come to care very deeply for Amos and his kin, you root for them at every turn through adventures and dangers of the Oregon Trail. You get to meet the pioneers that settled this country and appreciate the dangers they face to realize their dreams.

Holt's characters are human and she presents them to us warts and all. But, warts and all, we come to care for the prejudiced Henrietta, and the loving Rebecca, the distant Jake and the silent Blue Owl, whose quiet strength wins Amos over completely.



Holt gives us a glimpse of the hardships of life on the frontier. A winner of the National Book Award, this novel deserves a place among the works selected for classroom reading.

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