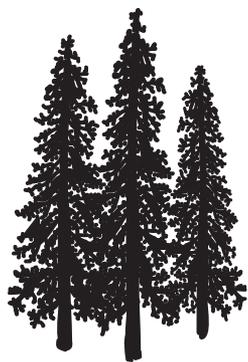
The book cover features a blue gradient background. At the top left is a bright sun, and at the top right is a crescent moon. Below the sky is a white line representing a mountain range. In the middle ground, there is a winding river. On the left bank of the river are three dark evergreen trees. In the center of the river, a white horse is depicted. On the right bank, a large, dark, leafy tree with visible roots stands prominently. The author's name is printed at the bottom of the illustration.

**Tree Root  
and  
River Rat**

Faith Richardson



“The doctor’s office called while you were at the river. About all those tests, you know. I went down there, he wanted to see me alone.”

David paused, a forkful of pie abandoned on his plate.

“They don’t show good things, those tests. They show lumps. Lumps that the doctor says are going to grow bigger. It’s them growing that make your back hurt more and more.”

“You said the pain was there because I was growing so fast . . .”

“No. It’s the lumps. I saw them,” Annie’s face drew itself down, long and thin. “They looked like radishes inside your bones.” She swallowed.

David stared at her steadily. “Do you mean, like, tumours?”

She nodded; her mouth looked queer, wrenched to one side.

David continued to stare at her, her wayward mouth. *Tumours*. “Tumours? Like people with cancer?” Suddenly, “I’ve got cancer?” He heard the words projected into the air, tone incredulous, vocal cords like stretched rubber bands, tiny arrows asking the impossible, the absurd . . .

“And I’m just supposed to die now?” David heard his voice spinning sounds as flat and thin as the tape in cassettes. How could he be asking such things about himself? *Me. David. The River-Rat . . . .*





**Young Adult Fiction**  
**by**  
**Faith Richardson**

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*Dark is a Color*

*Hoverlight*

*Angel Walker*

*Tree Root and River Rat*

*The Peacock's Stone*

*Christmas Pigeons*

# **Tree Root and River Rat**

**Faith Richardson**

Published by Fox Song Books  
Los Angeles, California

Tree Root and River Rat  
by Faith Richardson

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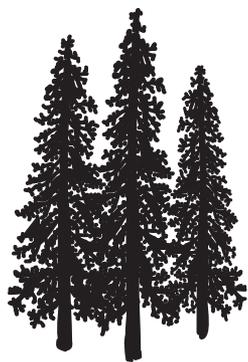
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Dedication – Tree Root and River Rat

*For every one of my palliative and hospice patients:  
past, present, and future. I marvel at your strength,  
and I thank you for allowing me the privilege of  
walking just a short ways with you on your most  
precious of journeys.*



# **Contents**

**Chapter One – David Jonathan Yellowfeather**

**Chapter Two – Anne Teresa Foxfire Girard**

**Chapter Three – Arabella Lorelei Franklin**

**Chapter Four – The Muskrat**

**Chapter Five – The Circle of Green Giants**

**Chapter Six – The Arrival of Spring**

**Chapter Seven – The Angel, Jeff**

**Chapter Eight – Father Bernard**

**Chapter Nine – A Gift**

**Chapter Ten – Riverbend High**

**Chapter Eleven – The Christmas Tree**

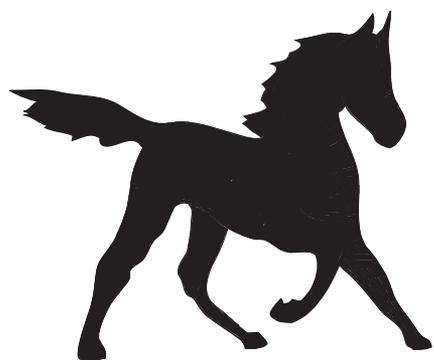
**Chapter Twelve – Christmas Day**

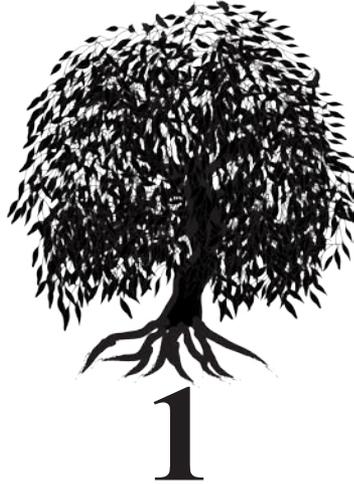
**Chapter Thirteen – Ash Wednesday**

**Chapter Fourteen – The Elderberries**

**Chapter Fifteen – Easter**

**Epilogue – *For my mother***





*David Jonathan Yellowfeather*

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**T**he trees had been still that day. David remembered the stillness whenever he thought back to last summer, the last day of holidays, the last few hours when everything still was normal.

*Normal!* David smiled inside. He glanced up from the open notebook on his lap and laid down his pen, automatically opening and closing the fingers of his right hand. David gazed out the window by his couch-bed through the intermittent, restless moonlight, saw the outlines of twists of twigs shaking stiffly in the March wind. He closed his eyes, seeing the stand of willows at the river's edge, hints of unlit green buds buried in their rough, cold-repelling bark. Then, his mind traveled

on through the forest, up the mountain, to the secret circle of green giants.

Inside, the fire popped, then licked silently at a split log in the fireplace, but behind the glass the wind hurried his thoughts down the wet, aromatic cedar lane to the road, curving around the grey river bend where they scattered, dancing like raindrops upon the surface of the granite boulder, then whirled up, and rushed up the trail to the hemlocks. Tonight the trees appeared as great Indian sachems, giants standing shoulder to shoulder, with robes like liquid emerald.

David's owl feather pen slid off his lap, bounced on the wood floor and came to rest against a half-rolled sock. And in that tiny fraction of time, his thoughts also, abruptly corralled by that pen, crowded against that same scrunched sock.

David rolled his eyes at the impudence—and power—of the pen, and carefully maneuvered his body sideways until, with the least amount of motion, his fingertips could just brush it. Flat on his back, he held his breath and, using the first and middle finger of his right hand like forceps, he stretched and thought *rubber arm! pincher fingers!* and tried to visualize the black-tipped, tabby-brown owl feather that made up the body of his pen.

There! The tip was in his pincher fingers and he slid the feather-pen along until his whole hand could grasp it. Then a wave of pain rose up and he swallowed hard as the wave crested and broke over him.

When the pain subsided he opened his eyes and, out of habit, traced the knothole in the ceiling that looked like a crouching cougar. *What had he been thinking?* His fingers

~Tree Roof and River Rat~

played with the stiff softness of the owl-feather pen and he felt the weight of his yellow, hard-bound journal on his thighs.

*Last summer. Normal, that was it.* David gave a wry grin. As if any part of his life would ever have been described as ‘normal’ by any of his school friends. Or teachers. Or neighbors for that matter—adult and otherwise. For how normal was it to walk with a lurch because one leg insisted upon facing east while his body navigated due north? And how many boys of fourteen have misshapen spines resembling the hunchback of Notre Dame? *Well, not quite.* David’s inherent honesty compelled him to admit that yes, his spine was twisted, and yes, when he wore a tee shirt you could see that his shoulders were very narrow and his back rather rounded. But if he wore his heavy plaid shirt, open at the collar, only starers noticed the weird contortions of his spine. Starers, by definition, were people that didn’t miss much; but David, in spite of the occasional starrer, wore his red lumberman’s shirt and was happy.

So normal he was not. David brushed the owl feather against his chin. People didn’t think he was normal—not only because of his physical deformity. And not because he was an Indian—many Native Canadians lived at Roberts Creek.

David reflected. People didn’t think he was normal for a mixture of those reasons, but especially because he lived with Saddleback Annie.

Saddleback Annie, David’s foster mom, had the opposite spinal deviation. Her back curved in too far, like an old, swayback mare. She had only one real front tooth. She and David lived in an A-frame log cabin heated by a stone

fireplace and Annie's giant range of a wood stove.

Saddleback Annie made their living by smoking salmon, growing herbs and vegetables, and by scavenging at the local dump. Annie boasted that her greatest treasure had been found and rescued from the dump, but David had never yet heard her say just what that treasure was. He had always assumed she meant her cookstove, but it also could have been the pile of National Geographics she hoarded, or Raven, their old dog, now dead, that she had found as a shivering pup tied in a sack on a pile of stinking garbage bags. Or, it could have been something else. Unspeakable in its immensity. Something entirely different . . . but even tonight, with the Trees so close and the wind so daring . . . No, David wasn't quite prepared to put such a sacred thought into unrelenting ink within his journal.

David knew Saddleback Annie was not your typical mom. He knew what few people did—what Annie was not, but also what Annie was—rich in humor, frankness, and horse-sense. And David knew that she loved him, misshapen David, with a deep, fiercely-honest love.

One thing that David did not know was exactly how he came to live with Saddleback Annie. He knew that he had been just a baby, and that his mother had been the age he was now, and that she and his father were dead. He assumed that Welfare, or some social worker, struck blind by David's guardian angel, had brought him to Annie, and for this he was very grateful.

David smiled. Annie had her own way of doing things. When David reached three years and six months old, Saddleback Annie took the boy to the river and threw him in.

## ~Tree Roof and River Rat~

David still remembered it, a tiny movie he could play in his head and silently laugh.

There was little David flailing, arms stiff, striking the flat, wet surface. He sank once, thrashed his way upward, gulped a mix of air and water, sank again, thrashed his way up, up, up again, fighting mad at Annie. Through the stream and spray little David saw Annie peering out from behind a tree at him, and he began yelling horrible things at her—in between coughing and gasping. In the middle of his tirade it dawned upon little David that he was swimming. Like a jerky, water-logged, angry fish.

So through Saddleback Annie, David found his freedom. For in the buoyant medium of water, David began to move and turn and glide effortlessly through the water; his limbs and spine, freed from gravity, seemed to come alive in the river, and instead of feeling malformed, David felt whole and moved with fin-like precision among the reeds and the willow tree roots that grew into the river.

His school friends called David “River Rat.” Not only because he swam as fearlessly and effortlessly as did the solitary muskrat encamped along the river bank, but also because his eyes were dark, and his hair, fine, flat and deeply brown, when wet, clumped into a long, thin tail that trailed down his neck, almost to the rounded place on his spine.

But now the March wind cloaked the moon, and raindrops, hard-hitting crystal fragments, rattled the window testifying that even River Rat would find it too cold to swim now and probably would for another couple of months. Spring came early to Canada’s Pacific Southwest, but the arrival of summer was always anyone’s guess.

In three weeks it would be Easter; in three weeks and three days it would be eight months; on Easter Monday it would be eight months from the day when the trees stood so still.

Three weeks and three days. A long, long time if you were waiting for vacation to begin. A too-short time if your vacation were just three weeks and three days. Time enough to think, remember, record, figure out things? David shook his head. *Who knew time? Beginnings and endings—who knew about when?*

The fire-licked log dropped and split, and the flames renewed themselves. Willow branches, buoyant in the wind, flowed across David's vision, now obscuring, now parting and making a way, to the river, onward, up into the circle of trees . . .



It was the muskrat who led David to the trees. David was floating on the river that hot early September afternoon, and he watched the muskrat glide back and forth in front of its lodge, its small, wedge-shaped head moving mysteriously across the water by no apparent force, leaving a small wake behind it. The muskrat paused, suspended, in the deepest pool in the bend of the river. David, bumping gently against a thatch of willow roots, raised his head and looked lazily around for what had disturbed the muskrat. He saw nothing.

The muskrat continued to hang motionless in the water, and David watched, wondering what the creature saw that his human eyes could not see. He had decided the muskrat was

## ~Tree Roof and River Rat~

zeroing in on a small fish or tasty tadpole and was waiting for just the right moment, when the muskrat turned 180 degrees in the water and headed for shore. It looked neither right nor left until it pulled itself onto the shore line. Then it stopped again, gave a quick, liquid shake, turned its head and seemed to fix David with a long stare from glittering, small, black eyes. David stared back with his larger, but just as intense, brown eyes. The muskrat cocked his head, continuing to look long and hard at David, and then turned away from the river and began picking its way in a deliberate manner through the scrub.

David, his interest now fully piqued, swam to the river bank and hauled himself out by grasping the reeds with his fingers and bracing himself against the bank with his good knee. Gravity always seemed to grab his body with a little more force every time he climbed out of the water; each time he reentered the air and earth medium it seemed more and more difficult to make the transition. The afternoon was so hot David was sweating by the time he shoved his feet into his running shoes and stumbled through the thatch where he had last seen the muskrat.

There in the soft river-clay were the tiny bear-like paw prints of the creature, the muskrat's tail mark winding between them like a trailing ribbon. *Probably long gone*, David grumbled to himself as he pushed through the whip-like strand of willows. But no, there it was; the muskrat, glancing over its narrow shoulder, put its rear left paw back down on the ground. The creature's action reminded David of a cat just finishing a quick groom. The muskrat moved on, and David, swearing to himself whenever his bad leg hung

itself up on a tree root or a nest of scrub, followed.

The two traveled on through the brush, over the damp clay and jutting out willow roots, up the slope onto the drier, leaf-mealed humus of the forest floor. From the sour-moist smell of the river to the clean bark and needle smell of the woods where the alders conceded to the conifers, David followed the muskrat. The sound-charged air emptied, changing from the buzzing busyness of a horde of river insects to the high-pitched yelps of the tree frogs, and then, to the occasional call of a bird high in the forest canopy or the rustle of a vole in ferns.

David walked between a clump of sword ferns higher than his head, flung himself over a fallen log, and marveled for an instant at the bright orange of the fungus-sculpture his hand touched on the wood. The trees were old and very thick here, the forest dim. The muskrat paused—for a second—and then walked into a tree.

David's eyebrows lifted. Cautiously, he drew himself closer to the towering Western Hemlock. It looked solid enough. Healthy too; tall—at least 100 feet—and wide . . . . David ran his hand along the reddish-brown, furrowed bark, began walking the periphery of its trunk, and his hand, arm, then his body slipped through and fell heavily inside the tree.

Or so it seemed. David turned himself right-side-up from the deep nest of rough-edged cones and blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. There was a large, cold protrusion at his back; he ran his hand along it, quickly discovering the coolness was a large, columnar-shaped chunk of granite. He cautiously sat up, leaning against the rock.

~Tree Roof and River Rat~

*A rock inside a tree?* David realized then the big hemlock was in fact two trees; his eyes followed the curvature of the trunks—no—three hemlocks grew around this large rock. So close were they each trunk seemed to curve around its neighbor, forming a near interlocking circle enclosing the boulder.

David pushed his way on through the three trees. This entwining circle was a vestibule of sorts, for when David slid his body between the overlapping trunks, he found himself inside a larger circle of hemlock and spruce and fir, all tall and straight and forming a tent over and around him. He could not see between the trunks to the rest of the forest; he could not see to the sky.

A silent, growing, green place. The tree-canopy allowed only a soft light to filter through, but to David, the light seemed to emanate from the trees themselves, so green and quiet was the glow. The muskrat had disappeared but David, slumping to the needle-soft ground, caught in the wonder of the circle of trees, felt no desire to pursue the creature.

David had no idea what fascinated him about this place. Perhaps it was the deep silence. His ears heard nothing, yet he felt, or heard from a different place, an elastic, stretching, sort of sound. *Was he hearing the trees grow?*

He sat there a long while, feeling the thick roots of the trees running like veins just beneath the moss-covered skin, tracing with his eyes the circumference of the circle and the arc of the boughs high above him, drawing breath after breath of the cool, green light.

David held out his tanned, roughened hand to touch

the light. For that is how tangible it seemed: the light poured from the trees like green wine, and David drank it in, feeling all at once solemn and wildly happy. He couldn't imagine that anyone in the whole world had been there before him—any human, that is—and gratitude that he was *here*, and an exquisite terror at the seeming randomness of his happen-chance finding of the circle of trees overwhelmed him. David, who tended to talk out loud to himself, and to trees, and birds when all alone, was silent. As silent as the trees.

David forgot there was such a thing as time, and when he finally did emerge through the passageway of the three hemlocks, the forest was waking for the night. The wind moved through the upper limbs of the trees, blowing in a damp twilight full of creaking limbs, chill mists and sudden hoots.

David was not afraid, but he knew that Saddleback Annie would be afraid for him, and would take out her worry on him, so, after marking the hemlock's entrance with three flat stones, he did his best to hurry down through the forest to the willow thatch. He reached the riverbank and only then did he catch a glimpse of what he thought was the muskrat; two eyes flashed two tiny fires in the night. Then, a whine of mosquitos forming a hellish halo above him, he followed the hush of the reeds down river until he smelled the smoke from Saddleback Annie's smokehouse.

She was standing on the porch of their A-frame cedar house waiting, peering into the night for him, her wiry arms crooked, hands on her hips. David exploded with apologies.

“Sorry, Annie—I totally forgot the time—wait till I tell you what I found—“

~Tree Roof and River Rat~

Her eyes were strangely gentle; David paused and stumbled, smacking his bad foot into the lowest porch step.

“Not to mind,” she said gruffly. “Come and eat.”

David eyed her, waiting for words. He shuffled past Annie’s rawboned figure, feeling her sea-grey eyes watching him, feeling the weight behind them of constrained feelings. There was no remedy for it; he knew Annie would talk only when Annie would talk.

All through supper it was he who did the talking.

“Annie, have you ever known a muskrat to leave the water, like this one did? To walk into the forest, away from water, and his lodge—away from safety? With a human following him?”

Annie shook her head. She had not spoken beyond a grunt indicating amazement, or unbelief, the odd monosyllabic reply, and once, a indignant reminder that chard was meant to be eaten, not assaulted with a fork and then ignored. David saw the gleam of self-satisfaction in her eye that always appeared when she phrased something in a way that pleased her. “They talk just like a dictionary,” was Annie’s highest praise for anybody. David often wondered at her book-like vocabulary and her quick turns of phrases that were both original and clever; Annie had never gone beyond the eighth grade in school, but she read voraciously— everything—even the labels on soup cans.

He chanced it. “What’s up, Annie?”

The look. David always thought of two red-beaming lasers when Annie gave him that look: sweeping up and down, scorning his every inch. How dare he force a story, or conversation, before its time? Then, something quite

Annie's lasers seemed to waver and begin to melt; she turned from the table and began rummaging in the kitchen utensil drawer.

"I slave over a rhubarb pie, and now there's not a knife in sight to cut it! How many times have I told you the knives are to go on the side of the drawer, so they don't dull up and so they can be found! You've only eaten one piece of fish pie, and no chard to speak of—do you think I'm blind and senile?"

David let her rave on while he finished his third piece of salmon pie, pushing the spinach-green of the chard deep inside the pie crust to fool himself. The knife she was looking for had been neatly set alongside the rhubarb pie long before dinner; Annie's clattering of utensils was so obviously a distraction he did not feel any need to point this out to her.

"All evening long—all day long in and out of the hell-fire heat of that gone-to-blazes smokehouse—then all evening long in front of the infernal stove. What for? For a pie—no two pies—for the boy. Two pies! It's still 90 degrees in here!" Annie gestured to the heavens, and her single braid swayed stiff as rusty barbed wire between her shoulder blades.

David stolidly munched on. Apart from the fact he was very hungry after an afternoon of swimming in the river and discovering the circle of trees, he ached to his bones. The hurried walk, first following the muskrat and then rushing down the mountain slope through the dark, had told on his body: his foot throbbed and he dreaded moving from the position he sat in. Usually, if his back was bad, as long as he stayed very still the pain diminished to nothing—like the stump of a candle burning itself out. Lately, it seemed

~Tree Roof and River Rat~

to David, the candle had been burning longer and longer. Tonight, even though he ate with his head close to the plate, and didn't turn his neck to look directly at Annie in her pacing tirade, this new, more persistent flame of pain had again invaded his spine and refused to be extinguished.

A huge chunk of rhubarb pie clunked down in front of him.

"Thanks, Annie. I could smell that pie all the way to the river . . ." he said dead-pan, but laughter ringed his dark eyes.

"Hah!" Annie retorted. "No one can smell anything from here to Mars—except for the heavenly aroma from my smokehouse."

"That's true," David continued. "Only last year in Science they told us the U.S. space station had picked up the scent of your smoked salmon on their sensors—"

"Yeah, yeah. Eat your pie." Her voice was at first jeering, but it softened as she spoke.

David pushed his dinner plate away and pulled the pie toward him. He tried, without success, to move his arm in a way that would not twist his back; a shiver of pain wrinkled his face and Annie's face tightened.

And then she spoke.

"The doctor's office called while you were at the river. About all those tests, you know. I went down there, he wanted to see me alone."

David paused, a forkful of pie abandoned on his plate.

"They don't show good things, those tests. They show lumps. Lumps that the doctor says are going to grow bigger.

It's them growing that make your back hurt more and more."

"Because I'm growing so fast. You said the pain was there because I'm growing so fast . . ."

"No. It's the lumps. I saw them," Annie's face drew itself down, long and thin. "They looked like radishes inside your bones." She swallowed.

David stared at her steadily. "Do you mean, like, tumors?"

She nodded; her mouth looked queer, wrenched to one side.

David continued to stare at her, her wayward mouth. *Tumors*. "Tumors? Like people with cancer?" Suddenly: "I've got cancer?" He heard the words projected into the air, tone incredulous, vocal cords like stretched rubber bands, tiny arrows asking the impossible, the absurd.

Her twisted, wrenched mouth formed the word, "Yes."

He shook his head.

A louder, "Yes."

Unbelievable, that he should have this alien thing growing in his spine and further damaging his already twisted body. He sat there, staring at Annie's face, hearing the whine of a mosquito, tasting the acrid sour of rhubarb on his tongue. Yet the thought of cancer had not been far from his mind, ever. He had heard that cancer was a painful way to die, and as he had never been far from pain, cancer had seemed dramatically familiar. Not any more. Now it was an invader, a terribly alien assailant, threatening everything. Everything. The sun in the sky.

She said, "Yes," again. A forlorn 'yes,' more negative

~Tree Roof and River Rat~

than affirmative. That is, the meaning was ‘yes, you are about to be negated.’ Annie reached out and grabbed at the air, trying to kill the mosquito.

“And I’m just supposed to die now?” David heard his voice spinning sounds as flat and thin as the tape in cassettes. How could he be asking such things about *himself*? *David. The River-Rat. The boy who lives with Saddleback Annie.*

“The doctor wants you in for chemotherapy and some other treatment. At the hospital.”

“Radiation?” He had seen pictures of hairless kids being slid into a tomb-like chamber.

“Maybe. First medicine in your veins. Chemotherapy.”

“Does that mean they think they can cure me?”

She shook her head wretchedly. “They don’t know everything!” Annie yelled. “Sometimes they don’t know nothing!” She corrected herself, “Anything. Sometimes they don’t know ANYTHING.”

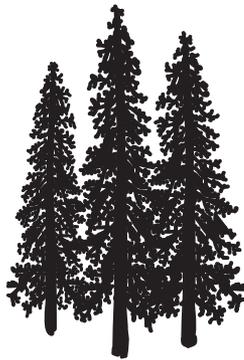
And then, soft and intense, Annie said, “They don’t know anything about life. *They don’t know life.* Real life. The trees, they’re the only ones that know life. They reach to the stars and down to the hidden rivers. They watch, they live, they know. Animals, insects, they’re too busy feeding and mating. And grass, grass grows everywhere—on old compost heaps and over last fall’s garden rakes, and dies in six months anyway. People are worse—they live longer than animals, but know less than animals about themselves, about life. They live like grass—hectic, then burned out. The frost comes and—nothing but sticks left. Those doctors, peering into their pill boxes, they don’t know life.”

“How long do they think I’ll live?” Earth brown eyes gazed into Pacific grey.

“Six or eight months.” Saddleback Annie picked up the remainder of the rhubarb pie and pitched it, plate and all, out the screen door. Then a hoarse rattling sob jerked up from her diaphragm and she clutched David to her chest.

Six to eight months. The phrase seemed to reverberate in David’s head, alternately loud, hollow, echoing, then soft and whisper-like, like ripples on the river. This pain wouldn’t ever go out like a burned-out candle end anymore. This pain was alive.

So, this was the final blow to “normal.”



Faith Richardson has worked with Hospice and Palliative Care patients as a counselor and Registered Nurse, often with her Dalmatian, Jemma, as part of the team. “I am always struck by the hospitality and sheer grace that I am greeted with from my patients, even when performing my, sometimes painful, duties as a health care provider. I’ve learned so much about real-life courage and humor from these incredible people who have the precious understanding of the importance of simple, everyday miracles of daily life.”

Tree Root and River Rat is a joyful tribute to everyday heroes walking this journey.

Faith grew up in British Columbia, Canada. She currently lives in California with her husband, artist Vincent James Richardson, who provided the illustrations for this edition.

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For book ordering information, please visit:

<http://foxsongbooks.com>



**“Tree Root and River Rat is a beautiful book—riveting, compelling, [Richardson’s] best so far. The characters are marvelous, human & animal . . . ”**

**states Madeleine L’Engle, author of the Newberry winning classic, *A Wrinkle in Time*.**



## ***Tree Root and River Rat***

by Faith Richardson

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***“This is the true story of my life, the life of David Jonathan Yellowfeather, as I saw it and lived it, and the questions I asked along the way.”***

It’s the last day of Summer vacation. David’s having a wonderful day: swimming, hiking, spending every minute outside at the river and in the forest. But then evening comes, and his foster mom, Annie gives him the news: David’s back ache is not going to go away. David has cancer and it is very advanced. David has only months to live.

This is David’s story of wrestling with relationships, faith, and identity. David’s story may surprise you. No doom and gloom here: only raw courage, deep laughter, and a tender well of joy filling, overflowing, and oozing out the pages, as David discovers treasure in what others have discarded.