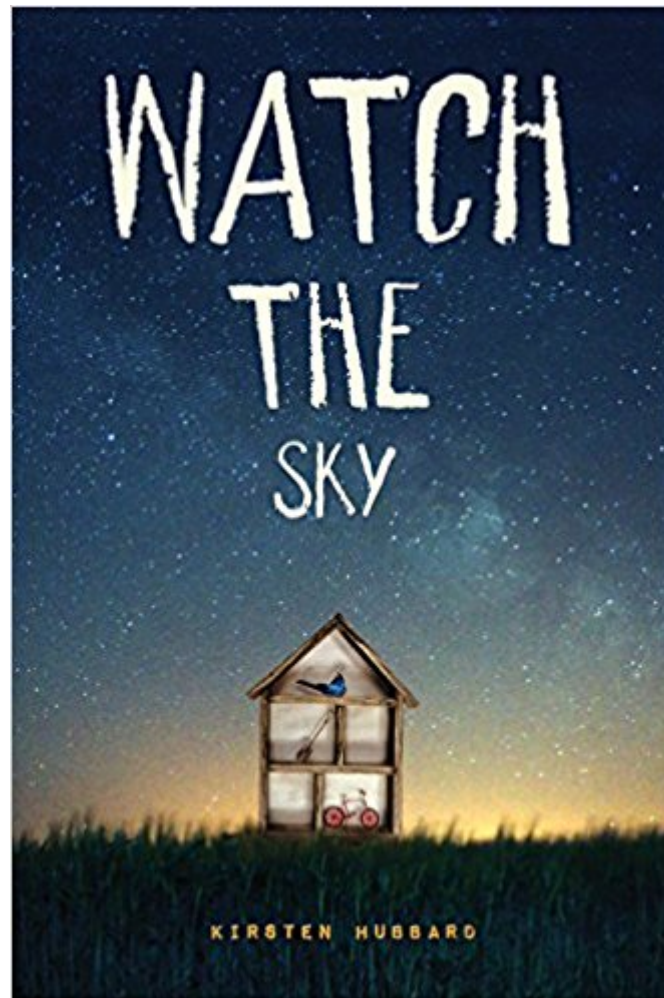




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# Watch The Sky



## Synopsis

The signs are everywhere, Jory's stepfather, Caleb, says. Red leaves in the springtime. Pages torn from a library book. All the fish in an aquarium facing the same way. A cracked egg with twin yolks. Everywhere and anywhere. And because of them, Jory's life is far from ordinary. He must follow a very specific set of rules: don't trust anyone outside the family, have your work boots at the ready just in case, and always, always watch out for the signs. The end is coming, and they must be prepared. School is Jory's only escape from Caleb's tight grasp. With the help of new friends, he begins to explore a world beyond his family's farm. Then Caleb notifies the family that the time has come for final preparations: digging in their backyard canyon at night. Every night. As the hole gets deeper, so does Jory's doubt about whether Caleb's prophecy is true. When the real reason for their digging becomes clear, Jory must choose between living his own life or following behind Caleb, shutting his eyes to the bright world he's just begun to see.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Gr 4-Jory's family has secrets. Not exciting we're-wizards-or-superheroes secrets, but ominous something-bad-is-coming secrets. "Signs are everywhere," says his stepfather

Caleb. But signs of what? Twelve-year-old Jory and his younger siblings aren't given an explanation. Caleb's paranoia isolates the family through grueling preparations for a catastrophic event just as a new friend and a caring teacher open up Jory's world. He learns to think for himself and begins to question the well-intentioned secrets that have dominated his family's life. Caleb's tightening grip is on a collision course with Jory's expanding views and reaches a crisis in an emotionally charged standoff at the novel's climax. Which man, Jory or Caleb, knows what is best for the family? Strong characters drive the carefully crafted novel and readers feel and understand their conflicts. Caleb is no villain but a sympathetic, tragic figure, misguided but sincere in the desire to keep his family safe. It's clear why Jory's mother, loving but fragile, married him. Sister Kit, an enigma to everyone but her brother, embodies the novel's otherworldly feel. Readers can't help but root for Jory as he warily lets his guard down, discovering the simple joys of friendship and that the outside world isn't something to be feared. Hubbard's sparse, elegant prose captures the rural landscape's desolate beauty as well as its dangers and palpably expresses the family's escalating tensions. VERDICT Unanswered questions will intrigue readers in this atmospheric, ultimately hopeful novel. — Marybeth Kozikowski, Sachem Public Library, Holbrook, NY

"In a haunting, tense, and moving story, Hubbard (*Wanderlove*) spotlights the unpredictability of life with someone suffering from mental illness. Jory's efforts to safeguard himself and his family will stay with readers, as will his tender relationship with his unspeaking, adoptive sister, Kit."

— Publishers Weekly "Hubbard's sparse, elegant prose captures the rural landscape's desolate beauty as well as its dangers and palpably expresses the family's escalating tensions ... Unanswered questions will intrigue readers in this atmospheric, ultimately hopeful novel."

— School Library Journal, Starred Review "Hubbard gets Jory's emotions just right ... The pacing moves smoothly, balancing the everyday with the impending Crisis, and the ending ties up every loose thread. An excellent choice for discussion." — Booklist "Hubbard writes fluently and accessibly ... An absorbing tale." — Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

I loved this book. It's pretty dark and has a good cliffhanger but it's well written and refreshingly different. It does leave a lot of questions unanswered and it hints at some things that could perhaps be addressed more directly but I think that the mystery of it is part of the appeal. I was fortunate enough to have the author visit my school and she is really interesting. I haven't read any of her other books but I definitely want to. I find the history of this story interesting as well. The sequel comes out soon and I really cannot wait to read it.

Book is excellent. A NEW copy was recieved looking VERY USED! Will follow with rest of book's review soon, if can read book.

My 12 year old daughter liked this book.

(Full disclosure: I received a free electronic ARC for review through NetGalley.) Signs were everywhere. Everywhere and anywhere, Caleb said. That was the problem. They came at any time. And they could be almost anything. Red leaves in the springtime. Pages torn from a library book. All the fish in an aquarium facing the same way. A cracked egg with twin yolks. "How do you know?" Jory had asked his stepdad once. "I mean, how do you know you're seeing a sign? Instead of a bunch of coincidental fish?" "You'll just know," Caleb had replied. Caleb was fickle with explanations. Sometimes he shared them. Sometimes he didn't. But he had no problem giving orders mostly camouflaged as suggestions. Eleven-year-old Jory Birch has been looking for signs for the better part of five years ever since his stepfather, Caleb, swooped in and "saved" him and his mother. From what, Jory's not exactly sure. A veteran who served "in a desert war" Jory didn't know much about, Caleb is convinced that something's coming. Something \*big\*. That's why he moved his family; why mom; Jory; and Jory's younger siblings, Kit and Ansel to the farm at the edge of town. Why mom spends most of her day picking and preserving cucumbers and squash from the garden; why Caleb is growing a stockpile in the locked barn; why the kids are discouraged from socializing with outsiders or confiding in anyone outside of the family. Jory's life is a maze of secrets and secrets which become increasingly harder to keep once Jory starts fifth grade and finds himself (gasp!) making friends: with the affable Erik Dixon and outgoing Alice Brooks-Diaz. Everything comes to a head when Caleb, convinced that THE TIME HAS COME, orders his family to begin nighttime construction on a bunker in the barren canyon behind their farm. Physically and mentally exhausted, Jory's nosedive in school doesn't go unnoticed; and before long, The dreaded Officials are knocking at the Birch's door. It's a sign if ever there was one, but of what? How best to describe WATCH THE SKY? It kind of reminds me of a younger, middle grade version of

Mary Miller's *THE LAST DAYS OF CALIFORNIA* is not about traveling cross-country to welcome the apocalypse, Jory and his family are tunneling underground, into "the extraordinary darkness of a place the sun will never reach." While the writing is quite lovely in some places, the overall story didn't do it for me. Maybe it's because some of the harsher, more sinister edges were softened for younger readers, but the story lacked that little extra oomph!. The ending in particular felt unrealistic; a man like Caleb, when challenged or betrayed, is more likely to resort to violence than turn tail and run. (And we already saw him hit Kit, so we know he has a propensity for domestic violence.) When considered in relation to Caleb's war stories, the ending has a certain sense of poetic beauty, but it still felt a little off. Ultimately the denouement lacked tension and left me unsatisfied. Much of the interplay that drives the story is between Jory and Caleb, but I found mom and Kit to be infinitely more interesting. Kit, especially, who at six years old suddenly appears in the Birch's pumpkin patch and whispers but one word (her name) in her first three years with the family. That said, *WATCH THE SKY* is wonderfully diverse. Disability issues take center stage, of course; Caleb is suffering from PTSD as well as paranoia; meanwhile, mom gets crippling migraines and clearly struggles with an anxiety disorder of some type (generalized anxiety? agoraphobia?). Because of this, it's difficult to view any of the adults as true villains (even as you love to hate the narcissistic, domineering Caleb), which makes for a more complex and nuanced story. There's also a fair amount of racial diversity. Kit has brown eyes and "olive skin" several shades darker than [Jory's]. And I can't help but wonder if racism underlies at least some of Caleb's animosity towards the girl. There's also Alice Brooks-Diaz; she has "dark eyes, dark skin, and curly hair, which she sport[s] in twin buns." While her father is Mexican the Diaz half of the equation Mrs. Brooks is described as darker than her daughter, which suggests that she's a WOC as well. And let's not forget the Mendoza twins and Sam Kapur, whose surnames suggest Latino and Indian heritage. Ultimately I think that *WATCH THE SKY* is one of those middle grade books that will appeal specifically to that demographic; in particular, Jory's journey to think critically \*and for himself\* can serve as a positive example to younger readers.

Jory Birch has always been told to watch for Signs. Signs could be a meteor shower in the sky, a

newspaper splattered with white paint, a little girl found in the pumpkin patch. Caleb, Jory's step-father, is a self-professed expert in Signs and knows they herald an oncoming danger that the family must protect themselves from. To prepare for this unseen danger, he enlists the family's help in digging a large tunnel in the giant canyon outside their farmhouse. With each hole Jory begins to dig, he feels himself questioning their way of life and wanting to break free. But how can he when family means everything and disobeying Caleb might be a matter of life or death? Coming in at only 262 pages, it would seem like WATCH THE SKY is a novel you could read quickly. Some could probably devour it in one sitting. But I think Kristen Hubbard's middle-grade debut requires more than that. WATCH THE SKY is a novel that unravels slowly, which is not necessarily a bad thing. It's just that you should probably take your time with it, like Jory, our protagonist, takes his time understanding the world around him. I admired Jory's strength in all this. I think everyone can understand the consequences of keeping a secret. But Jory has so many. He can't tell anyone about his sister, Kit, who doesn't speak and who appeared one day in the garden. He can't tell anyone about the tunnel the family is digging in the canyon or that they're stockpiling goods. There really isn't much that Jory can say to his classmates and teachers, and he's very isolated because of it. Despite all of that, he remains loyal to his family and protective of them, especially Kit. He's extremely intelligent and it's so frustrating that he's not able to showcase this more. He has to hide behind the signs, rather than performing in school and doing his work. As frustrating as all of that is, readers will be too engrossed to let go. They'll want to stick with the novel to see what the signs mean. They'll want to find out where Kit came from and if Jory can balance this family and friends and the secrets in between. I must admit, I kept waiting for a big twist ending or epic reveal and I don't think I'm giving anything away by saying that that's not what the novel is about at all. At its heart, it's about self-discovery. Jory is only a kid, but he has the weight of his family's secrets on his shoulders and the worry that any wrong move could bring negative attention to his family. Caleb always talks about the Officials and how Jory and his siblings could be taken away from his parents. So he keeps his head down at school, just scraping by and never making a friend. The paradigm shift comes when a plucky fellow classmate takes notice of him and he has no other choice but to talk to her. It's only then that he starts to come out of his shell and realize that there's so much more to the world than waiting for Signs of danger to pop up. I also

think it's fair to say that you don't have to fall in love with a book right away. Like the narrative, my love for this book unfolded over time and was slow to come. But the prose is so lovely and the truths in Jory's reflections are so fitting. I was impressed with how Jory grew over the course of the book and I think future readers will be, too. I don't have many criticisms for this book except to say that it reads a bit unfinished. There was so much more to the story that I wanted and a lot was left unsaid. But I felt that Jory's journey and self-realization was complete. He had always been strong, but at the end of the novel he used that strength when it mattered for his family. I really appreciated this quiet and beautiful novel and I hope that many other readers will, as well. Reviewed by Brianna Robinson

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