

A 13-year-old saves an entire family

Daphne Kalmar

"Stealing Mt. Rushmore"

Feiwei and Friends, 2020

It's the summer of 1974. More and more incidents are revealing that President Nixon is a crook. But in the working-class Sanders family, presidents are heroes, not crooks. Dad, a Korean War veteran and full-time short-order cook, attributes his own survival to the picture of Mount Rushmore he carried with him throughout the war; he planned to name his sons George, Tom, Teddy, and Abe. Unfortunately, his second child turned out to be a girl, Nellie—short for Susan B. Anthony. As the book opens, Nellie is 13. Dad pays her to look after her 6-year-old brother Teddy, because Mom walked out on the family five months earlier, leaving no address or phone number. To compound Mom's abandonment, as Dad finds out in the opening chapters, there is her theft of the \$500 that the family has saved up over the years for a camping trip to see Mount Rushmore. His dream trip stolen, Dad rushes out onto the door stoop in his underwear, yelling—then retreats to his bedroom for what Nellie knows is going to be a long time.

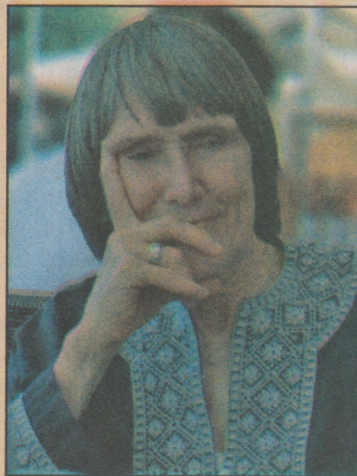
Dad's depression leaves Nellie in charge not just of Teddy, but of the whole family. Her oldest brother, George, is no help. In fact, when he comes home from work at the diner, he says he took the money and got it to Mom. Her 10-year-old brother Tom is quiet—too quiet—and prone to "disappear" into the cellar and his model airplanes. Dad does get up eventually, but his workdays are long, and he simply collapses in front of the TV when he comes home. After talking with her best friend Maya, Nellie decides she can hold the family together

only by raising the money they need to afford the Mount Rushmore trip. Tom agrees, chipping in his paper-route money and making extra change loading groceries at the local Stop & Shop. Nellie does yard work and contributes her savings, but that's not enough. With Maya's help, she half guiltily, half angrily arranges a yard sale of the clothes and jewelry Mom left behind. Her anger at unjust adult behavior spills over when she and Teddy see a dog being beaten by its owner; they rescue it and take it home. Hoping to win Dad over, they name it Abe. Unsurprisingly, Dad says the dog must go, but Nellie stands up to him, arguing that Abe is always happy, so he cheers them all up. Abe stays. It's a small victory, but the kids need his flea-bitten cheer, because the family nearly ruptures, and the promised trip seems increasingly out of reach, despite all Nellie's efforts.

"Stealing Mt. Rushmore" is technically middle-grade fiction, but like all good children's books, it also appeals to adults. The Somerville, MA, setting is convincingly portrayed: the neighbors are sketched quickly and humorously, the humidity and heat are clearly stifling, the subway trips that Nellie and Teddy take to the swan boats in Boston are filled with atmosphere. The historical details are slipped in effortlessly as Nellie reads the headlines in the Boston Herald American, the newspaper Tom folds at 5 am and delivers. The

Sanders family's emotional limbo and increasing disillusionment with Mom subtly parallels the national limbo and disillusionment of the days before Nixon's resignation.

Most memorable, however, is Nellie's stubborn refusal to let her family fall apart, joined to the love and support she unfailingly gives to her distraught and confused youngest brother. This is a delightful read.



One-Minute Book Reviews

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