

The Selected Works of T. S. Spivet by Reif Larsen.
Harvill Secker 2009.

When I was about 14 I was encouraged to read J D Salinger's Catcher in the Rye; I was assured that it was 'brilliant' and absolutely spot on for someone of my age. I devoured it within a couple of days and on finishing it felt puzzled and cheated in almost equal measure – what on earth was all the fuss about?!

I thought of Catcher when I was reading The Selected Works of T.S.Spivet, but only for one reason: that I suspect it will divide readers in the same way as does Catcher in the Rye. Some will love it, others will wonder what the enthusiasts were raving about. So let me now nail my colours to the mast: I LOVED this book, indeed I would go further and say that after nearly five decades of constant and passionate reading there are few books that I have read, and certainly only one novel, that have thrilled, excited, moved and enraptured me more than this one.

T. S. Spivet is a child genius who lives in Montana with his down to earth cowboy father, his obsessive scientist mother, his sister and a dog, and he also had another brother who has died in mysterious circumstances. TS, which stands for Tecumseh Sparrow (you will have to read the book to understand why), is a map maker of obsessive brilliance, and his art brings him to the attention of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington which, unaware that he is only twelve years old, awards him one of his most prestigious prizes and invites him to the US capital to receive it.

TS decides to make the trek alone across America to Washington, and a major portion of the book details his adventures on this extraordinary journey, a voyage of self-discovery, incident and profound realisations about those closest to him. Its conclusion is intensely satisfying and very moving and left me, most unusually, in tears.

I cannot recommend The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet highly enough for it is a quite magnificent, glorious book, and I can only add that if its author, Reif Larsen, does not win several literary prizes for his brilliant creation there will be no justice in the world of literature at all.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh