There was the rumor of a beautiful sky witch, who soared across the heavens in a great silver balloon. And there were whispers of a terrible ogre made entirely of chocolate, who lured unsuspecting souls with that rich promising smell, only to cast them down a bottomless pit from which there was no return. Everlost, the limbo land of dead children, is at war. Nick the Chocolate Ogre wants to help the children of Everlost reach the light at the end of the tunnel. Mary Hightower, self-proclaimed queen of lost children and dangerous fanatic, is determined to keep Everlosts children trapped within its limbo for all eternity. Traveling in the memory of the Hindenburg, Mary is spreading her propaganda and attracting Afterlights to her cause at a frightening speed. Meanwhile, Allie the Outcast travels home to seek out her parents, along with Mikey, who was once the terrifying monster the McGill. Allie is tempted by the seductive thrill of skinjacking the living, until she learns a shocking secret: Those who skinjack are not actually dead. Critically acclaimed author Neal Shusterman
writes a book about life, death, and how the choices we make define ourselves in this luminous sequel to Everlost, which Orson Scott Card called marvelously inventive...and magically beautiful.

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**Personal Review: Everwild (The Skinjacker Trilogy) by Neal Shusterman**

The follow-up to Shusterman's Everlost and the second book in his "Skinjacker trilogy," Everwild is quite simply one of the best juvenile novels I've read in a long time. I hadn't read the first book when offered Everwild, and though I could tell that this was indeed a sequel--particularly in the backstories of several characters (e.g. the McGill & Allie)--Everwild stood fairly well on its own. The story's a fast read which I finished in two or three sittings, never feeling I had to flip ahead or skim over any "slow" parts.

First, the basic premise (much of which is laid out by one of character Mary Hightower's homilies as an introduction to the book): Everlost is an ethereal netherworld, a kind of limbo populated by the spirits of deceased children, or "Afterlights." Afterlights don't age, don't hunger or need to breathe, and don't feel pain; they can see the shadows of the living world around them, but only a talented few can interact with the living: "skinjackers," who can possess living humans, and "ectorippers," who are able to rip matter from the living world into Everlost. (Normally, only those bits of well-loved or well-historied inert matter make their way to solidly occupy Everlost--think the Challenger space shuttle and the Hindenberg, for example.)

The plot opens in the middle of the struggle between prim and chipper (and annoyingly self-righteous) Mary Hightower and the Chocolate Ogre. Mary feels Everlost is the true paradise and that each Afterlight needs a task to keep him or her happy--amounting to eternal drudgery. Nick, the "ogre," wants merely to help each Afterlight take the coin he or she arrived with and pass on beyond into the proverbial bright light at the end of the tunnel and whatever true afterlife awaits them. Even having not read the first book, it's quickly evident that not everyone is as they seem: Nick's hardly a monster despite his appearance, whereas Mary goes well beyond mere eternal Pollyannaism and into sociopathy. This struggle takes the Afterlights deep into the "Everwild," or uncharted areas of Everlost, from Florida to the shores of the Mississippi where the story meets a cliffhanger of an ending in Graceland (a "nexus" which takes every Afterlight's nature to absurd extremes), and culminates with the first stages of Mary's shocking plan to bring more and more children directly to the "paradise" of Everlost (e.g. murder them) and keep them there for eternity.
The narrative does a good job balancing a cast of several different characters while playing out the plotline between Mary’s and Nick’s goals. Though at times I felt a bit left out from not having read the first book—clearly, Mary’s brother Mikey "the McGill" has quite a backstory which is only hinted at in Everwild (having been a shape-changing monster before, apparently)—overall, the story in Everwild is self-contained enough to enjoy on its own. The end is a fair bit of a cliffhanger (which I don't want to spoil, other than to say Nick's plan to get Mary out of Everlost is short-lived at best, no pun intended), and the concluding volume is something I'm eagerly anticipating: how will Mikey (and the remade Nick) defeat Mary's murderous plans? Will Allie be able to overcome her skinjacking "addiction" and deal with her shocking discovery as to why skinjackers can possess the living and why that ability vanishes after their "natural" life span?

One complaint I have often had in reading and reviewing juvenile fiction today is that many authors (and their editors) seem to think that a younger audience permits them to get away with sloppy writing: too much telling-vs-showing, poor grammar, hackneyed dialogue, stiff characters, etc. I'm pleased to say that none of those apply to Everwild—and I can be a bit pedantic about such flubs in prose and plot.

Overall, I was quite simply overjoyed in reading Everwild. Shusterman pulls off an imaginative, unique take in his creation of the world of Everlost, with intriguing, engaging characters and a well-paced, well-plotted storyline.

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