



Quirky Times at Quagmire Castle; The Gold-Spectre; Planimal Magic; Eyes Wide Open

Books Reviewed:

[Quirky Times at Quagmire Castle](#) [1]

Books Reviewed:

[The Gold-Spectre](#) [2]

Books Reviewed:

[Planimal Magic](#) [3]

Books Reviewed:

[Eyes Wide Open](#) [4]

Issue:

[144](#) [5]

Reviewer:

[Andrea Reece](#) [6]

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4

Four new additions to the 'Black Cat' series, these titles all use elements of the supernatural to deliver the 'Black Cat' promise of fast, exciting stories for fluent readers.

Wallace's **Quirky Times at Quagmire Castle** is a ghost story, though her ghosts are of the non-scary, comical variety. She sticks to a tried and trusted formula: Jack and Emily live with Aunt Tabitha in her crumbling but still stately home. Unfortunately, money is very short and evil bank manager Gordon Grabbit is ready to claim the castle and turn it into a des-res bungalow village. Luckily, the ghosts of two of Jack and Emily's ancestors come to the rescue - not by scaring the enemy off but with practical suggestions and help on how Quagmire Castle can become a five star hotel. The story bowls along at a great pace, various different storylines concerning the cast of wacky characters are woven in, and it's all great fun. Wallace isn't doing anything she hasn't done before but she does it so well, who cares.

The Gold-Spectre is another reworking of a well used formula - boy befriends boy, who turns out to be a ghost - but not so deftly handled. Joe's mother is ill so he must stay with his grandparents in Scotland, ten hours and a million miles from home. The setting is immediately established - a 'vast green space... strangely freaky' and it's only when he meets Robbie that Joe begins to feel at home. People have been panning for gold in the area for centuries and soon Robbie enlists Joe's help in reclaiming gold that was stolen from him and which is now guarded by the terrifying Gold-Spectre. The story of this genuine legend of the area and the ghost story at the centre of the book are wound together but it's not entirely successful and some of the impact of the original story is lost.

There's another Joe in **Planimal Magic**, also sent away from home and a sick mother. He must stay with his cousin and

her father, a mad botanist, and it's soon apparent that things are not right in the laboratory. Elements of Frankenstein and James Bond are mixed with the Pink Panther as the tone switches from ghost story to thriller to comedy. Buried beneath it all is an interesting idea: how powerful is the secret life of plants? What if humans could learn to appropriate that power themselves?

Eyes Wide Open is remarkably assured; a collection of six superb short stories, all to do with the power of changing perception. In 'Dan, Dan the Scenery Man' for example, young June joins her father in his amateur dramatics and watches as before her eyes he's transformed from dad and shoe salesman into someone totally different. Even more shocking, she discovers that when she's not there, her mum doesn't always choose to be mum either. The stories are full of short phrases, sometime two or three words only, that also illuminate perfectly: sunlight is 'weak but well-intentioned'; someone is 'the sort of woman who looks as though she's been put together out of string'; a memory falls 'grey ... like drizzle'. The final story is genuinely creepy and, fittingly, uncanny, for these stories are all about how almost nothing needs to change for nothing to be the same.

Running Order:

37

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Links:

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/quirky-times-at-quagmire-castle>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-gold-spectre>

[3] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/planimal-magic>

[4] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/eyes-wide-open>

[5] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/144>

[6] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/andrea-reece>