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Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Neither the vogue for children's fantasy, nor the formidable length of J K Rowling's schooldays megajapes, nor yet the popularity of Philip Pullman's dodgy metaphysics, should deceive anyone into supposing that this too is a children's book. Sophisticated teenagers who have gone past both Rowling and Pullman may find it the next port of call on a reading journey, but that is true for any age thereafter. This is not a 'crossover' book. It is for grown-ups, young and old. Its nearest equivalent that I can think of in children's literature is none of the current bestsellers but the neglected masterpieces of Joan Aiken, such as **Black Hearts in Battersea**, with which it shares the device of alternative English history. The book is massive. Its regular typeface is small, but in even smaller print are numerous enjoyable mock-academic footnotes, scrupulously referencing non-existent scholarship. Part of this book's game is to tell us almost nothing about the author, but to annotate the typeface in detail. At one level, the novel is an enormous joke. At another, it is a wonderfully inventive, original, terrifying revelation of the perils that come om reawakening the lost arts of practical magic. At another, it is a moving love story, in line of descent from Orpheus and Eurydice. Clarke's Orpheus figure, the young magician Jonathan Strange, successfully achieves a rescue from the underworld, although a costly one. All this in what is also a kind of historical novel, set during the Napoleonic wars. Such disparate elements ought not to blend effectively. They do, in part because of the central, ever-evolving relationship between England's two magicians, Strange and Norrell, and in part because of the author's versatile, apt and elegant narrative. A bunch of self-satisfied scholars in York, for whom magic has long shrunk to erudite theory, little know what they're letting themselves in for when they stir real magic up. Nor does the reader, setting out on this immense, strange fiction. For adventurous, committed adolescent readers, it holds inexhaustible surprises and delights.

Running Order:

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