



A Shadow Bright and Burning

Jessica Cluess

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Henrietta Howel can burst into flames.

Forced to reveal her power to save a friend, she's shocked when instead of being executed, she's invited to train as one of Her Majesty's royal sorcerers.

Thrust into the glamour of Victorian London, Henrietta is declared the chosen one, the girl who will defeat the Ancients, bloodthirsty demons terrorizing humanity. She also meets her fellow sorcerer trainees, handsome young men eager to test her power and her heart. One will challenge her. One will fight for her. One will betray her.

But Henrietta Howel is *not* the chosen one.

As she plays a dangerous game of deception, she discovers that the sorcerers have their own secrets to protect. With battle looming, what does it mean to not be the one? And how much will she risk to save the city--and the one she loves?

Exhilarating and gripping, Jessica Cluess's spellbinding fantasy introduces Henrietta Howel, a powerful, unforgettable heroine, and an entertaining world filled with magic, monsters, and mayhem.

A Shadow Bright and Burning Details

Date : Published September 20th 2016 by Random House Books for Young Readers

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Author : Jessica Cluess

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From Reader Review *A Shadow Bright and Burning* for online ebook

Jesse (JesseTheReader) says

(4.5)

Full video book review here: <https://youtu.be/TDJD6KBqHJk>

Christine Riccio says

Fun, solid beginning to a new fantasy series! I'm fascinated by the magical hierarchy. Here's my full booktalk/discussion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkg7j...>

Ben Alderson says

Really good debut from Jessica!

I love the more fantastical take on England. And obviously, anything with witches and soccer is going to love!

A burning YA novel that stands for equality, inner strength and embracing your insecurities!

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

\$1.99 Kindle sale, Sept. 7, 2017. The second book in this series will be published later this month.

3.5 stars. Full review, first posted on Fantasy Literature.

In this Victorian-era fantasy, sixteen year old Henrietta Howel, who is now a teacher at the Brimthorn orphanage in Yorkshire where she has spent the last eleven years, has developed an ability to magically set things on fire. She believes this marks her as a witch or magician, who are imprisoned or put to death in England since a horrific event eleven years earlier, when a magician's spell misfired and opened a portal in our world from another dimension. Through this portal entered the Seven Ancients, magical demons who have been terrorizing England ever since, killing hundreds of people with the help of their Familiars, humans who have been turned into their evil servants.

While magicians are vilified in British society as a result, sorcerers, on the other hand, are revered despite the fact that a sorcerer participated in the spell that released the Ancients. Additionally, the distinction between sorcerers and magicians is a rather fine one, based on certain techniques in their use of magic that have very little apparent practical effect. In any event, Henrietta fearfully hides her magical ability from

Agrippa, a visiting sorcerer who has been called in to find the source of several mysterious fires ... until she is forced to use her powers to save her close friend Rook, a stable boy, from being carried off by a demon's Familiars. But when she is found out, rather than being executed or punished she is hailed as the first female sorcerer in ages, the one who, it is prophesied, will save England from the Ancients.

Henrietta is whisked away by Agrippa to study sorcery at his London home along with six handsome (of course) young men. But sorcery just isn't working for her the way it should, and she fears, for good reason, that she's not actually the Chosen One, but merely an illegal magician. So Henrietta enters into a dangerous deception, sneaking away from Agrippa's school to learn magic instead from Hargrove, a London magician living in hiding. She thinks, or at least hopes, that no one will notice that she's using magicians' techniques rather than sorcerers'.

The promotional description for *A Shadow Bright and Burning* proclaims that Henrietta "meets her fellow sorcerer trainees, handsome young men eager to test her powers and her heart. One will challenge her. One will fight for her. One will betray her." Your reaction to this blurb will be a major clue as to whether this book will be your type of a fantasy or not. If you are charmed by the notion of a teenage main character being the sole female in the company of a smorgasbord of cute teenage guys, several of whom are rather interested in her, then I highly recommend this book to you. If the idea caused you to roll your eyes, then you may want to give this book a pass. The plot is as much about Henrietta's relationships with Blackwood and Magnus, two of the sorcerer students, and with her tortured friend Rook, who has come to London as well, as it is about the larger conflict with the Ancients. Some readers will appreciate the more relationship-oriented aspects of this book, while others are likely to be disappointed.

The characters in *A Shadow Bright and Burning* tend to be stock characters, though a few show more depth. Some of their names are amusing, if heavy-handed, clues to their nature: The abusive Mr. Colegrind (who runs the aptly named Brimthorn School for Girls), the devious Master Palehook, the wealthy, distant (and distinctly Mr Darcy-like) Blackwood, the brave and dashing Magnus, and so forth.

Jessica Cluess creates an intriguing world in *A Shadow Bright and Burning*, with Lovecraftian monsters running roughshod over Victorian society, but her writing style here, although smooth, is a little simplistic for older readers. In fairness, this is being marketed for ages 12-18, and there will be many in that age group ?I think it's safe to say they'll be primarily girls ? who will think this is a wonderful fantasy. There are a few elements in it that make me hesitate to recommend it to younger readers in that age range, including some nightmarish violence and a passionate make-out session that threatens to wind up in bed. To Cluess' credit, in the latter scene Henrietta acts as I think a well-brought-up Victorian girl would. As it turns out, her caution is justified, which is a nice change of pace from some of the sexually explicit YA fantasies I've read recently.

Henrietta and her friends learn some good life lessons, like accepting oneself and others, developing inner strength, and fighting against class prejudice. The NOT The Chosen One plot twist (which is not a spoiler; it's revealed in the book blurb) does make Henrietta's journey a more challenging one, and I'm interested to see how this will play out in this series. While *A Shadow Bright and Burning* doesn't end on a cliff-hanger (for which I am devoutly grateful), it is rather open-ended, leaving much of the story to be resolved in the sequels. This isn't a book for every fantasy fan, but I think it will appeal to many younger readers ... as long as they're not terrified by monsters.

I received an ARC from the publisher, Random House, in exchange for a review. Thank you!

Hailey (HaileyinBookland) says

This started off pretty strong, but then I quickly lost interest and it became just average. This reminded me of a lot of other books, including (but not limited to), Harry Potter, Jane Eyre, Mortal Instruments. It did have an interesting twist on those stories, especially concerning the whole flip on the typical 'chosen one' story. I liked the Victorian setting, but the world building was lacking, the MC made all decisions based on the character of Rook, a character that I felt like I never really got to know so their relationship never stood out to me. The writing was solid. I loved the setting of Victorian England, and the different magic systems colliding. It was good, I just was left wanting more.

Adam Silvera says

I want to read this book so badly I'd set myself aflame.

Yusra ? says

DNF @ 31%

honestly, I've lost all interest and I've never been so bored. might pick this back up in the future, might not, who knows at this point. the only bright point was magnus I guess. I tried to read this for 12 days and it's just not working.

a pal read™

Jessica ❀ ➤ Silverbow ➤ ❀ Rabid Reads-no-more says

Reviewed by: Rabid Reads

I began reading A SHADOW BRIGHT AND BURNING with trepidation. I'd read the preview months prior, and at the time, I'd been greatly impressed, but since then I'd suffered numerous disappointments of the finished-product-not-remotely-living-up-its-promise variety.

And initially, my inner cynic taunted me, pointing out perceived flaws, whispering to get it over with and DNF already . . . Then a hobgoblin unexpectedly appeared, and I told my inner cynic to shut its trap.

B/c FAE.

From there, the already interesting early Victorian England--this version plagued by seven Ancients that walk and talk and quack like demons--expanded into a spectacular alternate version of our own world with sharp-toothed faerie dressmakers, tricky, not-to-be-trusted-but-oh-so-charming Magicians, estates gifted by

fae royalty, yet still recognizable by the ugly, ugly prejudice.

Henrietta Howel is a witch in a time when witches are burned. An orphan, she now teaches at the charity school where she was raised . . . The charity school currently being visited by a royal sorcerer . . . A royal sorcerer whom Henrietta fears was sent to investigate the rumors of mysterious fires.

Mysterious fires that she herself is responsible for.

But when she meets the man, she is surprised to discover a kindred spirit:

"I find a dash of insolence to be quite enjoyable from time to time."

Then we discover that Henrietta is *not* a witch, and Agrippa (the royal sorcerer) not only believes that she is a rare female sorcerer, but also that she is the girl prophesied to take England back from its demonic invaders.

Is Henrietta this so-called Chosen One?

Maybe she is and maybe she isn't. After reading the last page, I was still undecided. The only thing I knew positively was that whatever the answer, it's not so simple.

Also not so simple is the answer to the inevitable question: is there a love triangle?

There are two definitive love interests (maybe a third, if you're a particularly contrary sort, who never goes for the obvious choices), but the way Cluess handles the situation . . . Honestly, neither are good candidates for our girl. And anyway, it's not one of those angsty, dueling for the lady's affection scenarios.

Option 1 is a comfortable childhood friend, and option 2 is a flamboyant and hilarious blue blood you don't take seriously until option 1 starts to look like a Red Shirt, then you don't take him seriously b/c REASONS, then option 1 looks less and less like a Red Shirt . . . but still you can't help feeling like no good can come of it . . .

Basically, I felt option 1 is only in the running b/c familiar, and option 2 made me swoon a time or two, but I never gave him my heart. *whispers* I *may* be the contrary sort I mentioned earlier.

BOTTOM LINE: though Henrietta's future HEA may at this time be unclear, I didn't feel jerked around or manipulated like with so many other love quadrilles triangles.

As for other typically YA aspects some of you try to avoid, there were surprisingly few.

I felt the first few chapters were a bit rushed, the circumstances coming together far too serendipitously, but once we got to where we were going, things began to unfold more naturally, and often hilariously.

Beyond that I had a couple of minor issues where Henrietta's not-so-simple situation and her fear of discovery were referenced a bit more than necessary, and a couple of times she was appallingly self-absorbed: (view spoiler)

But those times are few and far between, and only warrant comment as explanation for my 4.0, not 5.0, star

rating.

Overall, A SHADOW BRIGHT AND BURNING by Jessica Cluess, the first installment of her KINGDOM ON FIRE YA fantasy series, was a delightful surprise, and I very much enjoyed this fantastical version of early Victorian (NOT steampunk) England. There are hideously beguiling Fae creatures, repulsive demons hellbent on England's destruction, rapscallion magicians in hiding, and a girl with a gift that terrifies her, who may or may not be her world's salvation.

Among other things . . .

Highly recommended.

Emily May says

"Now, listen, Miss Howel. I've never seen another girl who could do what you've done, and I've searched for four years. I've never met another sorcerer who could burn and walk away unscathed."

Maybe five or so years ago this book stood a chance. But, come on, there's not a single thing in A Shadow Bright and Burning that we haven't all seen before.

Limited world-building and a **plethora of potential love interests** fuel this derivative Victorian fantasy. It begins with a familiar premise: an orphaned, mistreated girl called Henrietta lives a miserable existence until she is discovered by a sorcerer who claims she is a prophesied chosen one. He whisks her out of the life she has known and takes her to train her powers with other sorcerers.

Almost everything is borrowed from other series. Harry Potter being the obvious example, but there's some *Mortal Instruments/Infernal Devices* in there too, as well as others. The magically warded secret area of London called "London Proper" is reminiscent of Diagon Alley, and Rowling's influence rears its head again when Rook knows dark magic is coming because **his scars hurt**.

The author could have avoided this by developing her own take on both of these, but everything is skimmed over. Very little is explained. Much of this world remains a mystery to me even after finishing the book. When we do get some background information on the world, its history, and its magic system, it comes in the form of **forced, unnatural conversations**. The characters are clearly only discussing it for the purpose of educating the reader and it feels so out of place.

There's hints at attraction with at least three of the male characters. Though the Mary Sue heroine is adamant that she is unattractive and that everyone is DEFINITELY NOT in love with her, evidence abounds to the contrary. Other characters can see that Rook is in love with Henrietta but "Omigosh, no!! They're just friends!" even though she describes him like this:

Granted, Rook was attractive, with sharp, elegant features and blue eyes. His hair was still the same flaxen down it had been when we were eight. He looked like a poet or a gentleman, I'd

always thought, even if he was only a stable boy.

The book just doesn't do anything new. Even the attempts to put a new spin on the super special "Chosen One" trope result in a spin we've seen several times already.

And I simply couldn't find anything to read for. The book moves through a cycle of Henrietta practicing her magic in repetitive elemental displays, flirting with one of the boys, and doing something dumb. By the latter I mean that she always finds a way to rush into any magical attack, against the orders of the most powerful sorcerers.

I guess if you're still not over the whole "special chosen girl fights monsters and flirts with boys" thing, then this could work more for you. Me? I'm tired of it.

Also, one last minor thing: every sorcerer gets a stave, which is basically a big magic wand, and their magic is tied to it. Losing it is VERY BAD. However, if you want me to appreciate the seriousness of losing one's stave, don't name it **Porridge**.

"The pain of losing Porridge, the mere idea of it, threatened to crush me."

Ooh, that's very sad. But mostly funny.

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Nastassja says

Buddy-read with my special girls (no pun here; they are really special and, though, they don't have magical powers, they'd kick any special snowflake's ass easily) Katerina & Vira. Also, please, go read my friend Mila's review to see a more positive and well-structured point of view on the book.

"How I do what I do, but not how to do what I do? What if what I do has to do with my knowledge of what to do, and doing requires only the knowledge of doing? What would you do then?"

I blinked.

"I believe you hurt my brain."

I wouldn't say this book had hurt my brain, and there's no particular reason for displaying this quote above, I just liked it. That's it. Why can't I make something special, because I want to? I take an example from the author. **Special snowflakes everywhere!**

Special snowflake fact one: gosh, why does **this book reminded me so much of almost every fantasy book I've ever read or heard of?** Two major deja vu: *Shadow & Bone* and *Harry Potter*. The book started very similar to the first one, and in the middle turned into the second one. Plus add to the list an *Infernal Devices*, *The Burning Sky* and even *Angelfall*! And it's not the whole list! If only I paid closer attention, I'd find more, but I started skipping pages after 30% and missed some ~~important~~ moments.

Special snowflake fact two: **the story in nothing new**, though it filled with specialness (which I'll explain later). I wouldn't say the writing was bad - it was pretty decent; the story itself had some curious twists and turns, but somehow all this was annihilated by the **heroine's dullness**. I didn't feel life behind her voice. And to think about spending the whole book in her head, you'd hope there would be something to hold on to. But no such luck. It felt as if we were told about the world around in a mechanic manner: here we have magicians; they are bad guys. Here we have sorcerers; they are good guys. Here we have a special girl who will save the world. Here we have six guys and two of them will kiss the ground the heroine walks on. Here we have a childhood friend. She didn't have feelings for him before, except a sisterly bond, but now her heart flutters every time she sees him. Gosh, I wish you's just had a orgy, guys. But no, here we have a reputation to uphold.

I need to stop doing such writing or I'll bore myself to sleep. The point is - **scattered facts and underdeveloped pieces turned this book into a porridge** (pun intended as the heroine's magical stave is called Porridge. The girl named it herself. Wanted to feel special).

Special snowflake fact three: the author turned every potentially interesting character into a sniveling lot, and made the ones who were supposed to be unimportant into special snowflakes (view spoiler)**I wouldn't mind a change in characters if it was done gradually and properly, not because the author just wanted to move the plot forward at whatever cost.**

Special snowflake fact four: Did you read the annotation? Remember those words:

As Henrietta discovers the secrets hiding behind the glamour of sorcerer life, she begins to doubt that she's the true prophesied one.

Maybe it's my fault, because I saw in these words what I wanted to see, and the more disappointed I was. I wanted a girl who was prophesied to be the one and only, but turned out the wrong person, and in order to prove herself she's worth something, she fights evil with ordinary magicians like herself, and on her path she makes mistakes, falls in love, develops friendships and so on. You can create an amazing character-development from such setting. But look what we've got in this book: a girl is prophesied to be *the savior*. She goes to train her specialness. Everyone strokes her ego - **the girl can't go to toilet without anyone mentioning how important and special she is**, even bathtubs sing serenades to her. Slowly she turns from pretty to beautiful, smart, brave, delicate, strong, powerful... Then turns out she's not the girl from the prophecy (here I almost exhaled in relief - almost). She's better. She has powers from both sides, and who needs a *sorcerer savior* when you can have a *magician-sorcerer savior*. Special offer: two for the cost of one. Even the skeptic ones bow to her now.

"I'm a mix of both races, but I was born a magician. You have to know the truth." My heart pounded as I waited for his reply.

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "We need you. That's what is important. The rest is titles." Gently, he took my hand in his own. It wasn't a romantic gesture; it was deeper than that. We sat side by side, our burdens eased, if not lifted."

Who cares about fucking titles, when there's such specialness involved! The years-long hatred toward magicians is forgotten, and even her Majesty Queen says the kingdom needs our special snowflake, and lets her decide which title to give herself: *A special magician snowflake* or *a special sorcerer snowflake*. Guess what the girl chose? Of course, the prophecy *must* be about her and if not, she'll make it about her, so we have a new *sorcerer snowflake*!

I don't know about you, but all this *special business* is rather dull. Plus, I can predict which major events are going to happen in book two, and I don't even need special powers for it. The story tried to be as dodgy as possible, and every time someone tried to say something important, things happened: someone interrupted, or the one, who was supposed to say the thing, vanished, and so on. But these tricks were more annoying than intriguing, and felt like author's desperate attempt at preserving readers' interest at any cost. I didn't give a damn about any of them. I'll probably read the spoilers, shrug and move on to something more exciting.

Special snowflake verdict: *A Shadow Bright and Burning* is not a bad book; **if you haven't read thousands upon thousands of books about special girls and boys, you'll probably like this one.** As for me, I am too jaded and too bored to buy something with words "special" in it. Just give me ordinary and make it unique, and I am yours for fangirling.

Joshua Gabriel (???) says

I buddy read this book with the bookish king, Solomon, and the empowered fangirls, Cait and Ambs.

I am quite disappointed in myself for delaying this review for one month. I have been in a "reviewing slump" lately, and I want to get out of it as soon as possible. It's a good thing I still remember the important events that happened in this book. I really enjoyed reading it with my friends, but the book itself did not entirely please me.

A Shadow Bright and Burning is a new take on a beloved (or infamous) trope in YA: the Chosen One. The heroine, Henrietta Howell, is believed to be one who will save England from seven powerful monsters called the Ancients. When she discovers the falsity of her status, she struggles to keep her secret hidden in order to protect herself, as well as her best friend, Rook. Filled with political, magical, and romantic drama, this novel is fun to read, especially if you love fantasy.

This book struck me as fascinating particularly because it enforced a dichotomy between magicians and sorcerers. The former were ostracized tricksters who belonged to the lower classes, while the latter were highly-esteemed masters of the elements who were tasked to eliminate the Ancients. Magicians and sorcerers are generally seen as one and the same in other narratives, so it was intriguing how the author challenged the status quo. :)

Furthermore, I appreciated the author's implementation of diversity. Honestly, I was surprised that Henrietta was a person of color. Whether or not we care to admit it, YA fantasy predominantly revolves around Caucasian protagonists (and colored antagonists). Thus, I liked this book because it is a testament that change is happening in our bookish community. However, I must admit that Henrietta's skin tone was sometimes subtly made fun of. If the author merely wanted to reflect racism in Victorian England, I am willing to recant this criticism. ^^

Caitlin, Ambs, Solly, and I were not fans of the romance in this book. We already had a hard time memorizing the names of those six or seven boys, so we became more frustrated when Henrietta started to harbor feelings for more than one of them. In anime terms, Henrietta had her own reverse harem. I myself did not have an OTP to ship because she had no real chemistry with any of the love interests. :(

Perhaps the most controversial thing in this book is Henrietta's magic staff/wand, Porridge. Yes. She named

it FREAKIN' PORRIDGE. She did it to acknowledge her humble heritage, but my friends and I hated the name nonetheless. The action scenes in the book never failed to become corny and cringe-worthy whenever Henrietta spoke to her infamous weapon. I fervently wish that she would change its name in the sequel. :3

In the end, I enjoyed this book mostly because I read it with my friends. Sharing my thoughts and feelings definitely gave me a better reading experience. Still, the book itself is worth your time because it has strengths in terms of plot and diversity. I'm curious enough to continue the series, so I really hope that book two is much better.

C.G. Drews says

Well that was some fiery fun. But unfortunately nothing more?? I am a melon of high standards when it comes to epic fantasy, sadly, so **it really takes a lot to snabble my heart.** And like this had a LOT of cool elements but it just felt like a really cliché plot line. And I don't know if the book was, like, totally allergic to female characters, but there is literally ONE. (There's a few other women in the background, but like. That's it.) But ya know what? FIRE! MONSTERS! DARKNESS! SORCERERS! A MAGICAL STICK NAMED "PORRIDGE"! I'm really cool for all that stuff.

Oh and random thought: I can always tell when it's an American author setting a book in England? It just never feels really authentically English? I think it's the dialect.

I quite liked Henrietta! Except for her questionable judgement with kind of swooning at many available bachelors. Like, no, Henrietta. Pls be a your own person. But she still was pretty epic with her magic, she didn't like the patriarchy annoy her -- in fact, she set the patriarchy's hair on fire, WHICH WAS NICE. **I also loved her friendship with her childhood BFF, Rook.** He's in love with her, obviously.

Because everyone in this book is in love with Henrietta. Which I guess is fair?? BECAUSE THERE ARE NO OTHER WOMEN IN ENGLAND EXCEPT HER APPARENTLY.

Excuse me.

Look the romance wasn't BAD because it was barely there. But Henrietta was sort of making eyes at 3 guys at once and 1/10 I am not a fan. I particularly got annoyed at like, everyone. But here's a breakdown:

(A) Julian Magnus was sassy, sweet, self-deprecating, and raised by a single mother to be respectful and honouring of women...but then he went and was a jerk (view spoiler).

(B) Blackthorn was obviously the normal sexist, self-centred, snob of an sorcerer's apprentice BUT NOOOOO HE'S REALLY SWEET ON THE INSIDE; nah, I just wanted to punch him, mate.

(C) Rook, the childhood BFF who was actually attacked as a child so he has horrific scarring and chronic pain and HE KIND OF CONTROLS SHADOWS AND STUFF AND IS FAN-FRIKKIN-TASTIC AWESOME. And I loved him. But he was also incredibly uncommunicative and had no backbone whatsoever.

#1 plan -- Henrietta stays single, gets awesome at magic, takes over the country, rules world, punches evil with magic, need no man.

(FYI my #1 plan is most likely going to fail.)

But that all asiiiiide, I always do like magical stories! Except that I do get really bored when there's pages and pages and pages of them all just being at magic school. Like, mate, I don't care. Wave your stick and be magical. BUT LET'S MOVE FORWARD. And I don't really understand what was going on with the Ancients. But I was also napping in the middle because #bored. **And I felt Henrietta got less awesome with her personality as the book progressed.** Why was the book not 100% about Rook.

I LOVE ROOK.

ALL IN ALL: the storyline failed to surprise me, and I was a bit nappish in the middle, but I still love sorcerers and admire Henrietta! I'm not totally sure if I'd pick up the next one, but this was a fun thing to read in a day. And I *love* how she called her dastardly black magic wand "Porridge". Like seriously. GIVE THIS GIRL AN AWARD. I still liked Rook the best. Lead me to the tragic cinnamon rolls and thereto shall I fall in love.

Lola says

If you have little to no experience with fantasy novels, *A Shadow Bright and Burning* will shine like a star through your eyes.

But if you do, its true nature will surface and you will see this book as what it actually is: a poorly written book that stands for the unique reason that it's made of dozens of elements taken from dozens of different novels.

If you've read *The Infernal Devices*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Grave Mercy* or literally anything exceptional with magic or supernatural elements, don't bother with this one.

She's trying, the author really is trying. But she's playing it safe! She divulges very little about the world-building and its history, the magic and its provenance, the Ancients and their reason for existing.

So very little it's a shame. And the writing... It isn't bad, alright? It isn't bad because, again, she's playing it safe. The sentences are short, so very short, and she uses countless of idioms and commonly used expressions or even sentences in literature.

It's all too *clean*. There are no quotes to highlight because the author isn't inventive. She just knows how to put words one after another to form a novel, but her words are not impressive or worth remembering.

One thing that proves my argument is the amount of dialogs. To me, it seemed as if she didn't describe characters, situations, buildings or emotions enough because she just didn't want to. I get it, dialogs are more fun to write, but *come on*. What is more important is usually what isn't being said, if you know what I mean.

Could the characters' names be more annoying? Dee, Blackwood, Henrietta aka Nettie, Agrippa, Magnus (TMI/TID, Magnus Chase, Falling Kingdoms anyone?), Cornelius, Palehook, Rook, Cellini, etc. Those were all men, by the way, except for Henrietta.

The characters, too, are not original. They're *fine*, but Jessica Cluess inspired herself a little too much of the

memorable Tessa, Jem, Will and Magnus Bane from *The Infernal Devices*. It's so obvious I feel angry at the lack of originality.

I may finish this sometime if I ever find a reason to, but for now, it's a "did not finish" at page 174, ladies and gents.

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Rachel E. Carter says

How do I describe this book without breaking out into rabid fangirl status? UMMMM, how about THE INFERNAL DEVICES + THE BURNING SKY + PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (as in, Mr. Darcy). Yup, I went there. It's a Victorian England fantasy, and it was SOOOOO good.

Now, I'll be honest. Usually I don't like Victorian settings for my reads, something about society being too proper and women being too demure and I just get bored. Take Clockwork Angel -while I *love* certain aspects of that series, there were parts that just dragged because of the time era and diction. In ASBAB? It never dragged. There were never any slow parts or mindless era-dropping paragraphs setting a scene with Victorian imagery/routine/etc. Every chapter felt important and no character too polite. It was still the Victorian era but it just felt modern and refreshing.

The cast of characters was brilliant. No one can convince me that George Blackwell is not secretly a Mr. Darcy in disguise. His first condescending words describing Henrietta! Their argument at the dinner table over high vs lowborns! Their mutual (at first) animosity! His grudging respect of her as the book goes on! (view spoiler) Rook was more of a side-character -so while I felt pity, I recognize him more as what he will become (view spoiler) but Magnus was wonderfully charming (although he certainly had his faults). And I grew to love Agrippa (view spoiler) as the father Henrietta never had, and even the magician (forgot his fake name) who reminded me very strongly of Haymitch (not just the drinking, but also the desire to be good and still drive a bargain, not particularly cuddly but kind).

The world-building with the different races between magicians, wizards, and witches was kind of awesome. And the Ancients? They totally remind me of the Titans in Greek Mythology, or at least the ones I used to watch on the animated Hercules with some other movie, I don't remember. But I love the concept of being trapped in another world and then released to wreak havoc.

I have a theory who R'hlem really is, I had it about halfway through the book (view spoiler).

5 amazing stars. I can't read to read the next in series!

Cait • A Page with a View says

Forgive the length of this review but guess what else looks like this cover and perfectly summarizes how I feel:

This book had SO MUCH POTENTIAL and I was absolutely thrilled with what felt like a certain 5 star read for the first half. But then it turned into 4 stars and I kept staring at it in confusion as it slowly dwindled down to a 1 star that I didn't even want to finish at the very end. Like I could see the star meter just slowly dying... and I am so very sad.

The story starts with Henrietta living on the English moors at a miserable school with her best friend Rook. Henrietta has the ability to burst into flames (but her clothes don't burn off of her) and she's discovered by a sorcerer, who tells her she's the prophesied one to save them all. Henrietta is taken to London to train with six other sorcerer boys, but she demands that Rook come with so her love triangle/square can function properly. Meanwhile Henrietta needs to train to pass a test to be allowed to train as a sorcerer so that she can pass a test from Queen Victoria in order to... be a sorcerer.

The Ancients are part of a potentially interesting history about the divide that resulted between sorcerers and magicians when they summoned those monster things (basically magicians are despised now and sorcerers are awesome). Plot twist in the middle: (view spoiler). The Ancients were explained as:

*Seven are the Ancients, seven are the days,
Monday for R'hlem, the Skinless Man,
On-Tez on Tuesday, the old Vulture Lady,
Callax is Wednesday, the Child Eater,
Zem the Great Serpent crimps Thursday with his breath,
On Friday fear Korozoth, the Shadow and Fog,
Never sail on Saturday says Nemneris the Water Spider,
and rain on Sunday brings Molochoron the Pale Destroyer."*

But everything with these Ancients (and most major plot points) felt like it was casually dropped sideways into the story to the point where the story played it *too* safe. I wanted MORE. The plot danced around everything instead of going somewhere clear, so the weak execution made everything awesome hover just out of reach. (Plus, every time someone would be about to reveal their feelings or a crucial piece of information, there would be a knock on the door. Or someone would interrupt. Or the person would straight up vanish. This would've increased tension if I actually had something to care about or if it didn't happen every other freaking chapter).

I absolutely love other stories about magicians/sorcerers that are also set in Victorian England (like Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell, The Amulet of Samarkand, The Infernal Devices, etc) and this really reminded me of those books plus Harry Potter. But that's the issue... it only vaguely reminded me of them and didn't really contribute anything original. There were casual mentions throughout the story of faerie kings, a hobgoblin who serves Queen Mab, and some random fun creatures with multiple arms and pointy ears, but they stuck out like a sore thumb and seemed thrown in just to emphasize that this is *not the world you know*. The author had some interesting ideas, but was SO incredibly cautious about the whole thing that it was like every fun part of the story hid in the background and timidly poked its head in every few chapters to politely apologize for existing. I don't know how to explain but it just didn't work for me.

Henrietta herself was likable, but about halfway through she lost the strong character she had at the start... like there's not much reaction from her and she loses a lot of agency. And most of the story focused on the men in Henrietta's life telling her that women couldn't be sorcerers, that she'd never belong, and that it's not Biblical for women to have pride or power. It got to the point where I was like "I get that you're trailblazing here. I get that you're a girl and up against tons of odds... just GO DO IT or stop being the main character."

If you're totally new to YA fantasy or haven't read many YA books published in the past decade, this could totally be a fun story. But I feel like pretty much *every* YA fantasy book these days is about a super tough girl assassin/magic princess... we do not need to be told over and over that *girls can do things*. I excused this for the first half of the book because maybe this story needed to establish the time period's social norms. But it seriously got so old. Just have the girl kick ass instead of spending 90% of the story telling her she can't in order to build some obstacle for her to overcome. The story almost took a backseat to this monotonous tirade of "girls can't do that," which was boring when the story had so many other neat ideas that weren't used.

Ok and I need to talk about that Magnus guy because WHAT WAS THAT. He starts out the story as a cocky guy who reminded me a bit too much of Carswell Thorne or Will Herondale. Then Henrietta's good friend Magnus gets her drunk and tries to sleep with her, reveals he's actually engaged to someone else, and turns into a total ass. Then he confronts her later to say she was basically asking for it and can't say she didn't like it etc. He turns into a totally different person and spins a horrible story to everyone else which makes her apologize to him. BUT then a few chapters later Henrietta's kissing him on the cheek and telling him what a true friend he is and he's back to his cocky alternate personality?? And everything's good again? Is this supposed to be a character I like because NO. I was not moved when he finally accepted her as one of them.

Honestly, most of this book felt like a series of disjointed scenes to the point where I was completely detached and just watching it fall apart like "what next." Without a clear direction, even relevant info felt like filler. I rolled with it in the first half because the world & idea of the story were so much fun, but the story was still trying to find its footing at 75%.

This book mainly felt like it was setting up a bunch of sequels with all of these leads and hints about the identity of the guy who's training Henrietta and his connection with her dead parents, how Lord Blackwell's home at Sorrow-fell seemed familiar, the evil sorcerer and his minions, the Ancients visiting Henrietta in her dreams, the identity of the daughter of the main sorcerer guy, and all of the other stuff that *didn't matter* in this story. **Basically, the author introduced a lot of cool things, but never fully used any of it.** And there's a point where failing to give an explanation or follow through just loses my interest completely instead of creating suspense.

I'm still giving it 2.5 stars because ENGLAND. MAGIC. MOORS. All of the elements I love. And I might still check out the sequel because there IS a ton of potential in this storyline and the author's writing style is good!
