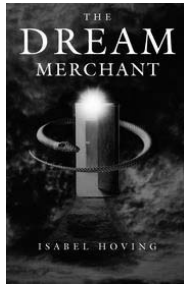


Book Reviews

The Dream Merchant



(638 pages)

by Isabel Hoving

Translated from Dutch
(Age 10+)

Isabel Hoving is not only an award-winning children's writer but also

an academic working in cultural studies – and it shows. Closer to Philip Pullman in fantasy-style than to J.K.Rowling, *The Dream Merchant* is set in London and rooted in the footloose dreaminess of children's psyches.

Introverted Josh is 12 years old and has a difficult home life. His father has been rather distant since the divorce, his mother has terrible taste in boyfriends and his sister is dating a creep. Josh's known talents amount to pilfering, remembering his dreams and falling asleep on cue.

This winning combination has inexplicably led him to be headhunted by a shadowy trade organisation, Gippart International. Gippart, however, who want to expand their commercial territory into the realms of the past, believe that Josh holds the secret to time travel and this is literally his point of departure.

Once propositioned for an exploratory voyage into the collective memory - introduced in this book as *umaya*, the dreamworld - Josh must learn to travel at will between composite visions of the past. These are very real and very dangerous altered states of consciousness: die in *umaya* and you won't wake up.

Joining Josh are Baz, his tabla-playing best friend who beats time to the rhythms of life, 14-year-old Teresa, a bard who can weave words into reality, and Jericho, Josh's unborn twin sister appearing in ghostly wish-fulfilment format.

The secondary characters take a while to warm up but develop beautifully over the course of the story to create an intriguing analysis of maturing adolescence, with theme and character development dovetailing perfectly.

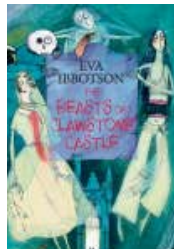
Given that the children are acting from within a composite dream, it follows that the plot is character-driven and unfolds according to the mental and emotional aptitudes of the children themselves. Similarly, the villains play out their roles in *umaya* according to their own personal values and meet an appropriate end.

Hoving, in common with most fantasy writers, employs a realist narrative style to establish her otherworlds as credible.

The language makes the book suitable for a child nearing the end of Key Stage 2 but the conceptual content is really more appropriate for an older reader. (There are also some horrific gory moments and veiled references to child abuse.)

For the more worldly child, inclined to judge books by their covers, this one's a looker; the hardback edition is studded with glass rubies. But it is also an intelligently-written book and ideal for Jungian introverts of all ages, or anyone who takes their inner world at all seriously.

Fiona O'Cleirigh



The Beasts of Clawstone Castle

(231 pages)

by Eva Ibbotson

(Suitable for girls or boys, read aloud from age 6/7. Read alone from 9/10.)

I was intrigued when a hardback copy of *The Beasts of Clawstone Castle* dropped through my letterbox as Eva Ibbotson, who writes for adults as well as for children, is often hailed as one of the best authors writing for children today.

We are introduced to Madlyn and Rollo, brother and sister, who are sent away to stay with their Uncle George and Aunt Emily in Clawstone Castle on the Scottish border. Rollo has a great affinity with animals and is very taken by the beautiful 'wild white cattle of Clawstone' that roam the hills.

Here the story takes off, as the children encounter a lively bunch of ghosts, ranging from Sunita the ex-circus girl (who really was sawn in half) to Ranulf de Torqueville, forever cursed with a rat gnawing at his heart.

Predictably enough, with help from the ghosts, the children are able to transform the fortunes of the castle, as visitors stream in to see the ghastly spectacle. But rather unpredictably here the story evolves into something quite different. Instead of being light-hearted and quite jolly, the tone and subject matter become much more sinister and consequently, gripping.

'Men from the Ministry' turn up and pronounce the cattle to be contaminated with 'Klappert's Disease'. Uncle George and Rollo are devastated as the cattle are taken away to be 'culled'. But when they discover that the cattle are not in their 'burial site' after all, they begin the journey to find them.

Hot on their trail, they travel to remote Blackscar Island, there discovering the evil Dr Manners who has stolen the herd with cruel and gruesome intent. He is going to operate on them and, using horns from slaughtered narwhales, turn them into unicorns!

Eva Ibbotson is not afraid to challenge children with this grisly subject, a broad range of characters and ever more complicated twists and turns. Not for the fainthearted, this isn't merely a story about ghosts but tackles, among other things, serious ethical questions including our ownership of animals and experimental genetics!

Somehow it all works; it is original, expertly written and real. Did it pass the 'do we care?' acid test? Yes - both I and my nine-year-old, did care very much. We were carried along by the fascinating story and became attached to the characters.

At the very end Eva writes, "So the children belonged to Clawstone and would return." We hope they do, so we all have an opportunity to read more about Madlyn and Rollo and *The Beasts of Clawstone Castle*.

Elizabeth McFarlane