



The Apothecary

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It's 1952 and the Scott family has just moved from Los Angeles to London. Here, fourteen-year-old Janie meets a mysterious apothecary and his son, Benjamin Burrows—a fascinating boy who's not afraid to stand up to authority and dreams of becoming a spy. When Benjamin's father is kidnapped, Janie and Benjamin must uncover the secrets of the apothecary's sacred book, the Pharmacopoeia, in order to find him, all while keeping it out of the hands of their enemies—Russian spies in possession of nuclear weapons. Discovering and testing potions they never believed could exist, Janie and Benjamin embark on a dangerous race to save the apothecary and prevent impending disaster.

The Apothecary Details

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Dewitt says

THE APOTHECARY

By Maile Meloy; Putnam, 2011

Despite its widely positive reception, I am baffled how Maile Meloy's fifth book, *THE APOTHECARY*—her first for Young Adults—could engage a serious writer's talent, even as a holiday from seriousness. There are investments: in the historical framework of 1952, in the Los Angeles of that time (with McCarthyism and the black list), and the London of that time. The author has done research and invested time and setting with realistic detail. The heroine, fourteen year old Janie, is a smart and nervy girl who models herself after Katherine Hepburn, and whose screenwriter parents, harassed as Communist sympathizers at home, take her from Los Angeles to London, where they are working on a Robin Hood script. From here, the story attempts to appeal to a Harry Potter audience. Janie becomes involved with an Apothecary and his son Benjamin. The Apothecary is descended through a clan of alchemists stretching through the ages and is now dedicated to containing and transforming nuclear weapons in the Cold War arms race, while agents from governments on all sides try to stop them.

Apparently this idea was pitched to the author by a Hollywood screenwriter/producer team, Jennifer Flackett and Mark Levine, whose credits include *MADLINE* and *JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH*. In her afterword, Meloy tells us they trusted her “with the beginnings of a story they cared deeply about. They described what they had imagined as a movie, let me run with it, and talked through the convolutions with me as it changed.” In other words, *THE APOTHECARY* is the novelization of an unwritten script, and will likely be turned back into script and film.

That said, I sense the serious writer having fun less with the plot, which verges on being slapdash and silly rather than inventive, than with aspects of the alchemists' transformative powers, which through various concoctions, powders, and herbs (especially those grown in the Chelsea Physic Garden in London), can temporarily change people into birds, force them to speak truth, make them invisible, reduce them to piles of salt (which can be rehydrated), and cast invisible nets powerful enough to contain a nuclear blast and its radiation.

For instance, here Janie is cornered by an adult secret agent on a rooftop. Her friends Benjamin and Pip have both taken a potion that changed them into birds, and now it is her turn, if she is to escape: “I felt a strange, rushing feeling my veins, and understood why Benjamin and Pip had looked so surprised. I'd never been aware of each individual blood vessel in my body like that, and of the blood coursing through them. Then I felt my heartbeat speed up, and my bones seemed to lighten....My skull felt like it was changing shape, and lightening, and I thought: Allow for the possibilities. And then I leaped, still human, off the roof.... My hands became wings in midair, and my legs became tiny bird legs.”

Here at least is a touch of meta-fiction: the “magic” is imagination, and the alchemist is a stand-in for the writer and her power with words. While such passages recall Ovid in *THE METAMORPHOSIS* or even Gabriel Marquez, many others tend to be simply realistic descriptions of technical effects we recognize from such films as the X-men series, imaginative clichés at this point.

In the love plot between Janie and Benjamin there is a sweet shyness, as well as mutual regard and kindred intelligence, nerve, and wits. The dialogue is consistently good. There is some fun with modesty as they must each undress to bathe in the solution that makes them invisible, leaving only a shoulder or tip of a nose visible so that they may detect each other. At the end, there is a long delayed and hard-won first kiss: “I

could feel the warmth of his breath and smell his clean, soapy skin. I wondered where he had slept and bathed, but then his lips touched mine and I felt a steady current of electricity running through my whole body. I knew I would never forget the feeling, as long as I lived.” Such moments are winning.

The educational product placement as Janie mentions Tolstoy, Dickens and Henry James at different points is commendable--plugs to young readers for the highest art of the realistic novel—but I find the public service moral against nuclear arms, as voiced by the Apothecary, more corny than visionary: “we must make the greater world a different place. As it stands, we are all threatened, at every moment, and nothing we can do to lock our own doors and earn our pay and tuck our children in bed will make the slightest difference.” Indeed; but for conviction try Neville Shute’s ON THE BEACH.

In a recent PW Interview Meloy mentions that while writing THE APOTHECARY, she “started itching to work on a grown-up book.” We look forward.

Maryam says

I really liked this middle grade adventure story. The writing style is very good and story is promising enough. Its actual audiences are young adults but I think anybody who likes magic and adventure can enjoy this book.

It’s 1952 and Janie is a 14-years-old American girl living with her parents in California. As her parents become suspected as “Communists”, they decide to move to London and work for BBC. Janie doesn’t like this change in her life and starts her new school skeptically. She meets Benjamin there, a strong boy who is not afraid of telling his opinion. They soon become friends and when Benjamin’s father disappears they start a journey to find him and also keep a very important book away from Russian spies.

This book is not only about adventure but friendship and love too. I liked mixture of spy thriller with magic and everything else.

Jan (lost pages) says

Inhalt

Von Amerika ins langweilige England. Eine drastische Veränderung, die Janie überhaupt nicht gefällt. Noch immer erkennt man die Spuren des Zweiten Weltkrieges, der erst vor wenigen Jahren endete. Warum gerade England? Warum gerade diese öde Schule? Warum gerade Benjamin, der Janie in ein waghalsiges Abenteuer entführt?

Benjamin wäre gerne ein Spion, und aus anfänglichem Spiel und Spaß wird bitterer Ernst, als er von seinem Vater, einem Apotheker, ein Buch in die Hand gedrückt bekommt. Die Pharmacopeia enthält eine Vielzahl

von alchemistischem Geheimnissen, das grenzt schon fast an Zauberei! Elixiere, die unsichtbar machen, die einen in Vögel verwandeln können, die einen zwingen die Wahrheit zu sagen... Benjamin und Janie sollen dieses Buch in Sicherheit bringen, denn skrupellose Wissenschaftler und andere dubiose Gestalten lechzen nach dem wertvollen Wissen und haben die Verfolgung bereits aufgenommen.

Meinung

Bei diesem Buch muss ich einfach ein paar Worte zur Aufmachung loswerden. Ich finde die Gestaltung einfach umwerfend. Das Cover ist wunderschön und die Motive passen allesamt super zur Handlung, aber es geht noch weiter. Jedes neue Kapitel wird durch ein passendes Motiv "eingeleitet", die absolut liebevoll angefertigt wurden. Ein echter optischer Hingucker!

Genug geschwärmt und jetzt wird es ernst...

Tja, aber besonders viel Kritik kann ich euch nicht vorwerfen. Maile Meloy hat einen schönen Jugendroman geschrieben, der besonders die jungen Leser ansprechen soll. Dennoch kann "Elixirium" getrost von "älteren" Leseratten verschlungen werden.

Denn im Gegensatz zu einigen anderen Büchern, die hauptsächlich an die jüngeren Leser gerichtet sind und dementsprechend stilistisch aus- und auffallen, schafft es die Autorin durch einen angenehmen Schreibstil zu überzeugen. Kein nerviger "Jugend-Slang". Ich bin einfach kein Fan davon, auch wenn es die Zielgruppe höchstwahrscheinlich anspricht, aber ich bekomme auf dauer Kopfschmerzen von den ganzen "Ey's" und "Jo's". So war ich glücklich über den flüssig zu lesenden Text! Beschreibungen fallen nicht zu dürftig aus, lassen aber noch Platz für die eigene Fantasie.

Fantasy hat in diesem Buch einen besonderen Platz. Der Klappentext hat sich für mich nicht im geringsten danach angehört, dass die Geschichte Fantasy-Fragmente besitzt. Aber als dann die Pharmacopeia ins Spiel kommt, das Buch hinter dem alle her sind, wird schnell die "Zauberei" sichtbar. So lassen sich kinderleicht Elixiere herstellen, die fantastische Wirkungen zeigen. Es kommt nur auf die Zubereitung an. All dieses Wissen steckt in diesem Schmöker und kann in falschen Händen zu einer enormen Waffe werden.

Aber erst einmal gerät das Buch in die Hände von Janie und Benjamin....und damit startet das Abenteuer der beiden. Janie ist die Protagonistin, aus deren Sicht wir das Abenteuer geschildert bekommen. Ich mochte sie ziemlich gerne, weil sie ein aufgewecktes Mädchen ist. Für ihre vierzehn Jahre verhält sie sich oftmals schon etwas reifer, aber das fällt nie negativ auf oder wirkt gar gestellt. Benjamin, als Gegenpart, konnte mich ebenfalls überzeugen. Besonders das Zusammenspiel der beiden ist oft zum Schmunzeln, denn schnell wird klar, die beiden mögen sich und zeigen das auf gelegentlich unbeholfene Weise. Wir waren ja alle Mal vierzehn!

Mein Liebling ist aber Pip. Pip ist ein kleiner Halunke und Straßendieb, der sich dem Duo anschließt. Mehr als einmal musste ich über seine lustige Art lachen und er bringt durch sein lockeres Auftreten richtig Schwung in die Geschichte!

Im Großen und Ganzen kann man sagen, dass die Charaktere die Geschichte tragen, aber nicht besonders tiefgründig wirken - tut dem Buch aber auch keinen großen Abbruch.

Die Handlung bleibt ab einem gewissen Punkt schwungvoll und rasant und zieht dieses Tempo auch bis kurz vor Ende durch. Die Nachkriegszeit als "dezent" aufblitzender Hintergrund, verleiht der Geschichte einen besonderen Flair. Lediglich die letzten Seiten, nach dem "Showdown" konnten mich nicht so überzeugen. Auch die dramatische "Explosion" im Finale ist in meinen Augen etwas ZU groß und wirkt schon sehr unglaubwürdig. Nichtsdestotrotz bin ich gut unterhalten worden!

Fazit

"Elixirium" bietet aufregenden, kurzweiligen Lesespaß, und ist in erster Linie an junge Leser gerichtet. Das soll aber nicht die "ausgewachsenen" Leser davon abhalten, sich von Maile Meloy's Geschichte verzaubern zu lassen. Wer auf eine spaßige, abenteuerliche Handlung steht, kann mit "Elixirium" sehr wohl seine Freude haben. Abgesehen von der fehlenden Charaktertiefe und den "unnötigen" Abschlusseiten, bin ich bestens unterhalten worden! Ich vergebe 4/5 möglichen Punkten!

Eva Mitnick says

It's 1952 and 14-year-old Janie's parents have just been blacklisted, which means a move for the whole family from Los Angeles to London. Janie experiences major culture shock - not only is post-war London gray, cold and drab, but also they have to put pennies in a meter just to heat their flat, there is still rationing, and the students at her new school are learning Latin.

Mostly, the students seem fairly snobby, but one boy, Benjamin, appeals to Janie. Intense and defiant, he wants to be a spy, not an apothecary like his father - but his father, it turns out, is much more than a simple dispenser of drugs and medicaments. Rather, he is one in a long line of apothecaries who have guarded the hard-won secrets of herbal and medicinal lore, all of which have been written down in an old tome called the Pharmacopoeia.

The Soviets, aided by the East Germans, want to get their hands on these secrets and will stop at nothing, including torture and murder, to get them. Janie and Benjamin join forces with a small bunch of eccentric and brilliant scientists, plus a street-smart urchin named Pip, to preserve those secrets and save the world from the threat of nuclear war.

Clearly there are familiar elements here, with bits and pieces reminiscent of The Da Vinci Code, Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and Kane Chronicles series, Baccalario's Century Quartet series, and even N.D. Wilson's recent The Dragon's Tooth. Ancient knowledge must be kept out of the hands of the bad guys, and only a couple of intrepid kids and a few trustworthy adults can save the world from Evil.

So yes, it's been done before. But what makes this book stand out is the freshness and competence of the writing, which sparkles with both humor and warmth. Meloy has a gift for introducing a scene in just a few perfect sentences, giving us an immediate sense of both place and emotional resonance. Here is Janie describing her first day at school.

The school was in a stone building with arches and turrets that seemed very old to me but wasn't old at all, in English terms. It was built in 1880, so it was practically brand-new... Two teachers walking down the hall wore black academic gowns, and they looked ominous and forbidding, like giant bats. The students all wore dark blue uniforms with white shirts... I didn't have a uniform yet, and wore my bright green Hepburn trousers and a yellow sweater, which looked normal in LA, but here looked clownishly out of place. I might as well have carried a giant sign saying I DON'T BELONG.

Making Janie an American who finds herself in England means we get to experience all the foreignness of a different country along with her, and in addition the readers can see how different 1952 was, when the Soviet threat felt very immediate and kids had to take part in bomb drills at school.

This isn't supposed to be a fantasy; it's science, not magic, that creates all the fantastical effects. However, any potion that can turn children into birds or make them invisible counts as magic in my book, so let's call this a fantasy and not science fiction. After all, Benjamin becomes a starling while Janie becomes the very American red-breasted robin, which feels like a very magical touch.

The blossoming of romance between Janie and Benjamin is both sweet and age-appropriate, and makes the ending all the more bittersweet. And yet the end is satisfying and right, even if it's one few readers would hope for.

The plot is supremely far-fetched in almost every way, and the science or magic or whatever makes no sense whatsoever - and these are definitely flaws, when one considers the masterful plotting of a book like Stead's *When You Reach Me*. But they are only small imperfections when measured against the quality of the writing and the delight of Janie's adventures with Benjamin and the rest of her odd companions.

Highly recommended for ages 11 to 14.

Mackay says

Shoulda known. The NYT review that was instrumental in my reading this waxed all poetic about Meloy's adult fiction and then said something to the effect that the reviewer was worried when commencing this because it was (gasp! o the horror!) fantasy, but Meloy's writing carried it off.

Really? That's what snobbish reviewers think is good fantasy? What do they know if they don't have anything to compare it to?

Some writers of adult fiction can carry off YA with grace and verve. I'm not sure Meloy did. The story is okay, though the characters are thin, the fantasy is given short shrift (if I'm gonna turn into a bird, I want to know what it's like! I want to experience bird to the core of my being!!), and the ultimate doom--hydrogen bombs--getting shut off by magic back in the McCarthy era, just seems weird and not fully realized, especially from the vantage point of the 21st century. Ho hum.

Rhiannon Ryder says

I'm telling you, my BEA shelf might be getting less crowded but it's still full of all sorts of fantastic gems. *The Apothecary* was one of those books I didn't even have to read the blurb for when I grabbed it at the BEA. That beautiful cover sold me on the spot. To my intense delight the art continues on to the inside, although my copy is missing a lot of it because it was so advanced, as if I need more excuses than that to buy a finished copy.

The Apothecary is not just another pretty face though, the story inside is very much worthy of all the delicious art. A magical tale, tied in with the Cold War, the story was one of those unique birds that is both fresh and exciting. I'm not sure the complications of the Cold War would be something I would ever consider putting into a children's book, and yet it makes a fascinating twist to Janie and Benjamin's world. Even more impressive is how Meloy manages to explain the basic elements of a complicated time period in a straightforward, no nonsense and easy to understand way. My high school history teacher could have done with a sit down with her.

Great concept and interesting time choice aside though, it's the characters who steal the show. Janie and Benjamin are both completely lovable and relatable. Janie's attempts to be cavalier and assured like Katharine Hepburn and her admiration of Benjamin for standing up to the lunch matron during the bomb drills,

"It's idiotic, I won't do it... we both know that these desks would have done nothing against those bombs...But this isn't even a V-2 we're talking about, This is an atom bomb. When it comes, not even the basement shelters will save us. We'll all be incinerated, the whole city."

not to mention her complete embarrassment during the smell of truth incident,

"All right," he said. "So who do you fancy?"

I hesitated. "Fancy means like, right?" I asked, stalling... "You," I said helplessly.

"Me?" Benjamin flushed crimson...

"Oh, that's embarrassing," I said. "I hate this. Quick, before it wears off, who do you fancy?"...

"Aargh," he said "I hate this, too! All right! I like Sarah Pennington!"

I was too shocked, briefly, to be mortified that it wasn't me. "Sarah Pennington?" I said. "She's awful! She's mean and pretentious!"

"I know." He seemed genuinely sorry about it. "But she's also beautiful. I don't want to like her. But I can't help it! She sits in front of me in maths, and the curve of her neck, under that braid, drives me completely mad."

"Stop!" I said. "Enough! It works."

make her one of the more lovable girl characters in the sea of strong boy characters in Middle School reads.

Benjamin on the other hand is feisty, unrepentant and yet the last to believe any of the Apothecary nonsense. Between him, Janie and later character Pip, there is no end of trouble they can all cause and get into. Honestly, I was more than a little bit jealous at the end. I wanted to hang out with these kids. Thank goodness there's more Janie and Benjamin goodness in the works!

A fantastic adventure with great characters this would be on the top of my list of new Middle school books for anyone looking for something to sink their teeth into.

Amusing side note? The author is the sister of the Decemberists Colin Meloy, who wrote Wildwood, another beautifully illustrated Middle Grade novel sitting in my TBR stacks for awhile now (the hubby read it awhile back and loved it). Who knew my book shelves were so full of family members?

Maja (The Nocturnal Library) says

Sweet and entertaining, but not what I expected.

It's the year 1952, and 14-year-old Janie is living a happy, carefree life with her parents in Los Angeles. One day, while walking home from school, she notices a black sedan following her, which causes her parents to panic and make some sudden decisions. Suspected of being communist sympathizers, they feel like they have no choice but to pack everything up and move to London.

Starting school in London is harder than she ever imagined. Janie hates everything about her new school: her classmates, having to learn Latin, speaking differently than everyone else... until she meets Benjamin Burrows, son of the local apothecary.

Benjamin's future is set. He's supposed to take over his father's business some day, but he hates the very idea of becoming an apothecary – he would much rather be a spy. It turns out, however, that Benjamin's father is nowhere near as boring as he seems. He is the keeper of a very important book, the Pharmacopoeia, and one of the very few people who know how to use it. When the apothecary gets kidnapped, it's up to

Janie and Benjamin to keep the book safe from Russian spies and others who would do anything to get their hands on it.

The Apothecary is a middle grade adventure book, with an (unnecessary) touch of magic. I usually have very little patience for middle grade books and I've been avoiding them ever since I got over my obsession with Enid Blyton some 15 years ago, but The Apothecary kept me interested and left me wanting more. Janie is truly an admirable heroine and she and Benjamin make a great team. They never once disappointed me, and even when they made mistakes, they realized them pretty quickly.

The magical elements felt just a little out of place at first. When the kids turned into birds and flew off a roof, I felt like I'd just been slapped. It did get better eventually, with the arrival of some new characters, but I think that I'd have been happier with a non-paranormal spy adventure in this case.

I've been told that there are some great illustrations in this book, but you'll have to read other people's reviews to find out about those. I can only tell you that the audio is very good. I didn't expect much from Cristin Millioti after she completely ruined Virals for me last year, but this time, she did an excellent job with all the accents.

For this review and more, visit [The Nocturnal Library](#)

Zora says

In the book, *The Apothecary* by Maile Meloy, 14 years old Janie Scott moved to London from Los Angeles and met the apothecary and his son Benjamin. One day, the apothecary was kidnapped by the Soviet and he gave Benjamin his ancient book the *Pharmacopoeia* and told him to protect it from the people who want to take it. Benjamin and Janie used the magic from the book and found the apothecary, but all of them are chased by the Soviet because the apothecary is trying to stop a powerful bomb from the Soviet with the knowledge on the book. At last, the apothecary and the children went on a boat to an island and successfully stopped the bomb before it destroys the city. The book talks about courage when facing your enemies and never gives up.

Betsy says

I can be a very smug librarian sometimes. It can get me into trouble. Take my reaction to the cover of Maile Meloy's *The Apothecary*, for instance. Here we have one of the lovelier illustrated book jackets to come out in recent years. Illustrator Ian Schoenherr really put his heart and soul into it. So what was my initial reaction? I picked it up, noticed the American robin on the cover paired with the image below of some buildings raising the British flag and sniffed, "That's not an English robin." I was feeling very pleased with myself because as *The Secret Garden* taught me, English robins and American robins are entirely different. It never really occurred to me that the fact that the robin on the cover was American wasn't just on purpose but essential to the plot itself. Come to think of it, there were a lot of things about this book that struck me as surprising when I came across them. The blend of historical fiction and fantasy (or is it science fiction?) for example. The engaging characters, memorable details, and compelling writing. Oh it had a couple fits and starts along the way, don't get me wrong, but if we're looking to tip a hat to a book that dares to do something a little different than its contemporaries, *The Apothecary* is worth that tip.

You'd think that growing up in Hollywood, California, the last thing Janie Scott would be worried about would be the American government. Yet when the blacklist forces her family to move as far away as

London, Janie finds herself navigating a whole new world. The year is 1959 and before she knows it Janie finds herself wrapped up in the troubles of a cute boy in her school named Benjamin. Turns out his father is an apothecary, and not just the run-of-the-mill kind either. Benjamin's father is one of a long line of alchemists and the secrets he holds are of interest to some pretty shady characters. Now it's up to Janie, Benjamin, and their friend Pip to aid the apothecary cause, even if it means heading straight for the heart of a nuclear explosion.

I think that it is safe to say that if a person were to pick this book up without any prior knowledge of the contents inside, they might very well believe this to be a book of straight historical fiction for approximately sixty-nine pages or so. They'll be brought up to speed relatively quickly after that point, but part of what I liked about this title was that Meloy didn't skimp on the historical details. She's perfectly aware that if you're going in for some serious world building, you need to get your facts straight. No surprise that when you get to the end Meloy credits books like David Kynaston's *Austerity Britain 1945-1951* with her research. Her attention to detail shows and rewards the reader with a book that doesn't place the book in the past for romantic or twee reasons. Meloy had a purpose in mind when she chose 1952. One that she, in turn, shares with the rest of us.

Mind you, there is such a thing as taking it too far. Enter Pip, an escapee from a Dickens novel. Not literally of course (though that would have been forgivable) but in the figurative sense. Pip is your average and apparently obligatory street-smart kid con artist. The kind more at home running errands for Sherlock Holmes than existing in a world with television and atom bombs. You half expect him to break into cockney rhyming slang half the time, making him a fun if slightly unbelievable companion to our two heroes. I tried to figure out why Meloy thought Pip would be a necessary addition and I'm stumped. Certainly it's more fun to follow three heroes in a book rather than just two. But Pip just seems so out of place every time he opens his mouth or picks a lock. It was a bit distracting.

Maile Meloy has, until now, primarily acted as an author of books for adults. In my experience, when an adult author makes the switchover to children's lit, the results are often patronizing, dull, or patronizingly dull. It's like authors for grown-ups see books for children as less deserving of decent writing than their adult brethren. So part of what I like so much about Ms. Meloy is that she seems to harbor a healthy respect for her readers. She makes unique choices with her book. For example, it's interesting to note that in this story our heroes are hoping to contain the effects of a nuclear test rather than an actual bombing itself. Huh! I will say that there's a bit of a Deus Ex Machina ending to this book that struck me as a tad silly but it's not something that sank the title for me. All told, Meloy makes the right choices at the right times nine times out of ten.

The question of audience comes up with a book like this, partly because the publisher itself wasn't entirely certain how to market this. Is this a book for children or teens? With its lovely illustrations and fantastical elements there's definitely a middle grade kid feel at work. On the other hand it stars a 14-year-old who has a small romance and deals with everything from Cold War politics to McCarthyism. Personally, I think tweens and teens alike will get a kick out of this book. There's no reason to limit it to one area or another.

I've been wracking my brain, trying to come up with a fantasy novel for kids or teens that's set in a past that isn't an alternate magical history like *Kat Incorrigible* or *Thirteenth Child*. It's rather rare and yet the idea is delightful. Cold War spying with magic. It practically sells itself! Maile Meloy takes this rather unique idea and rather than phoning the past in, does the necessary research, writes a compelling (not to say amusing) book, and the end result is a fantasy (or is it science fiction?) novel that can truly be called unique. It may have a funny little quirk here and there, but all told this is a strong piece of writing from a writer that I certainly hope we'll see a lot more of. Original. Quirky. Fun.

For ages 10 and up.

Matthew Salesses says

The story of an American girl who moves to England with her parents during the Cold War, after her parents are suspected as Communists. She meets a boy who wants to be a spy and whose father, the apothecary, has a magic book and is in trouble because of it. When real spies show up looking for the book, the two children set off on the kind of quest you want from a book like this. This time, the quest, the characters, the world-building, the magic, are in top form, so good that this book has set me off on a kids' books binge. There's so much fun here. Best book I've read all year.

I'm starting to think what makes a kids' book is Wonder. And also that Wonder is something that is missing from a lot of books written (only) for adults. I miss it. I didn't even know I had been missing it for so long until I read this book.

Catie says

Janie is a bright, all-American girl living in Los Angeles in the 1950's. Her world is like a lovely dream, until her parents tell her that they must pack everything and hastily leave the country to avoid being detained and questioned as suspected "communists." Days later, they arrive in dreary London, still recovering from the aftermath of WWII. Janie is immediately homesick, especially when she attends school for the first time wearing the wrong clothes and feeling left behind in her classes. But everything changes in the blink of an eye when she meets adventurous Benjamin, who plays at being a spy and wants nothing to do with his father's Apothecary shop. However, his father's work is much more than it seems. Their spy games become reality when Benjamin's father disappears, leaving behind a mysterious book.

I really enjoyed this, for the most part. It's a fun, fast-paced adventure with espionage, magic, escapes in the nick of time, and lots of action. The setting is wonderful and it lends a real dose of gravity to the story, as the characters deal with a world in which large scale death and destruction are now possible with the flick of a switch.

And I must say that I am very pleased by this new illustrating trend. I think that everything should be illustrated. Why let the kids have all the fun? The drawings in this novel are lovely and they add quite a bit to the story.

However, there are a couple of areas in this book where I wanted *more*. This book is middle grade in some areas, but in others, it feels overly simplified for that age group. The magic is a nice element, but it seems too simplistic and easy. The kids find the book and are successfully crafting potions within hours: there are no mistakes made, the potions always work, and they're incredibly easy to put together. And while some of the minor characters feel alive and vibrant (like the fabulously crafty Pip and even the haughty but rebellious Sarah), the two major characters are a bit flat. I never felt like I really *knew* them. I really liked what I could see, but they're not completely fleshed out.

The setting and time period provide an excellent opportunity for this novel to delve into moral dilemmas and earn itself a little substance, but it never *quite* gets all the way there, in my opinion. In many ways, this feels like a childrens' book.

I love the ending though. The scenes on the boat and on the train are just beautiful, and I like that things are

left a bit open-ended. I am a sucker for open endings.

Perfect Musical Pairing

The Jimi Hendrix Experience: 1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)

This is my favorite Jimi Hendrix song (make sure to turn it up right at 3:25). When war is raging and the whole world's gone to hell...why not just disappear into the sea and live under water forever? Sounds awesome. Sort of like how I wish there really were teams of superhero alchemists out there who could stop hydrogen bombs. Alas.

Terri Lynn says

I wish I could give this 10 stars. I loved this writer's style and story immensely. It's labeled for young adults but forget that- it is as delightful for adults of all ages as for teens. Set in 1952 Los Angeles and London, you'll love Jane, Benjamin, Pip, the Apothecary and maybe even Sarah! At the time of the Communist witch hunts in the USA, two screenwriters move to London with their daughter to write for the BBC to avoid being arrested as Communist sympathizers only for their daughter to get tied up in a magical mystery that will take her and her friends to the Soviet Union!

Steph Su says

THE APOTHECARY is the kind of middle-grade historical thriller that younger audiences or readers who are interested more in the actions rather than the thoughts and motivations of characters will enjoy best. I couldn't help feeling like it relied a little too much on old-fashioned attitudes toward WWII-era enemies and allies in its portrayal of foreign characters. It was disconcerting to see Jin Lo, the Chinese chemist, portrayed as a beautiful, poised, elegant, and a little snooty woman who casually swoops in to save the clumsy citizens with her stunning brain and, oh, just so happens to be good at kung fu as well. She is like the MG historical fiction equivalent of the perfect--and perfectly exoticized--Asian female kung fu master character that seems like a necessity in martial arts films and is the stuff of socially awkward, anime-loving teenage boys' wet dreams. Ick.

Janie was a pretty decent protagonist who didn't degenerate into pity-me helplessness no matter how hard the story tried to force its characters into cardboard roles. Janie's parents' and their friends are the kind of nerdy, intelligent, and wacky-humored adults that I want more of, both in literature and in real life. Unfortunately, the story's determination to let its nonstop fast pace slip and slide around without regarding for natural character development meant that, despite how potentially awesome the characters were, I never connected to the characters or the story.

Tina Hoggatt says

The Apothecary by Maile Meloy, a middle grade novel, can be read by all ages for its fine drawing of history along with meditations on family, war, power, freedom and the threat of nuclear weapons. If this seems heavy freight for adolescents be assured that these deeper themes are carried along by adventure, budding

romance and magic.

Janie Scott, the daughter of two successful Hollywood writers is wrenched from her comfortable life in 1952 Los Angeles when her parents take a job writing for BBC television. In brief scenes we know the ease and pleasures of Los Angeles, and are introduced to the paranoia and destructiveness of Joseph McCarthy's State Department investigation into communism, the impetus for the family's move. Arriving in London to a cold, cramped flat, Janie records her impressions of her new life in her diary and reacts with typical adolescent resentment to the changes she experiences. On her first day in London she meets the Apothecary of the title, who runs London's version of a neighborhood pharmacy, supplies the family with hot water bottles and gives Janie a remedy for homesickness that seems to work.

In her new school Janie meets Benjamin Burrows, the Apothecary's son, who has lost his mother to a German bomb during the Blitz and who refuses to "duck and cover" for a nuclear bomb drill. The two become friends. Benjamin would rather be a spy than dispense prescriptions like his father, and the two stumble upon Cold War espionage when they observe suspicious meetings in the park and discover that Benjamin's father is not what he appears. No spy, he has alchemical powers and harbors secrets that place them all in danger. When he disappears, entrusting an ancient book of spells and transformative elixirs to Benjamin, the reader and Janie are swept up in a journey of mystery and suspense that could end in the world's annihilation. With magical transformations, a pickpocket, murder, and the race to contain the power of nuclear bombs through physics and magic (and what is physics if not magic?), Janie, Benjamin and a host of well drawn and engaging characters are propelled through laboratories, capture and flight until they end up in the Arctic aboard an icebreaker with everything at stake. The resolution is surprising, suspenseful and tender, and left me hoping for a second book with these characters. I loved the magic and the very real relationship Meloy establishes.

Huzzah for the resurgence of illustrated books. The lovely drawings by Ian Schoenherr carry the story forward. A gorgeous book in the hand, compulsively readable and beautifully written.

Grace says

Because I have been watching Fullmetal Alchemist I have been trying to find some good books that include alchemy. So I picked up the Apothecary which said included some alchemic like action. After reading it found that the book was geared towards younger readers. The story also takes place around the cold war and the races to build atomic bombs. Other than that there was really no historical element that I found. I would say the alchemic magic was interesting and was the only thing that kept me interested.

Janie came off to me as a very generic character. I categorized her in loyal, nice, and curious which can be good traits, but they were not written well. She had no deeper level and the most emotion that I got from her was that she missed home and her parents. Being an american in London she felt like she did stick out when she first went to school and besides turing into an american robin it was she forgot all about it. She just had no depth, and that made her really boring.

Benjamin was a better character. He was funny, daring, and always had something up his sleeve. He was less boring than Janie though still not that good. Always wanting to be a spy came off as a childish dream, but he did more then just a nosey three year old. Still he was not that good. He lacked a lot of depth, but his character traits were more interesting.

The plot was not the best. It was a little too dry. Sometimes it moved to fast and left some parts unexplained and other times it was too slow and needed something to move it along. One of the most intriguing things

about it was it's alchemy. Turning people into salt then returning them back into human was a good element. There were other parts that seemed to forced though. The major one was school. Yes, we know they are students and that they still need to go to school and skipping school would be a bad example, but when you are being hunted down by the government and your dad is missing or dead school does not seem like a top priority. Characters also seemed forced in their as well. One character came in as a teacher, but then he turned into a spy. That particular transition was really rough and had back ground, but could have gone a lot smoother.

Like I said in the beginning, the book is geared towards younger readers. I would not recommend it to any big young adult readers, but I would recommend it to younger children or people who like children's books.

Hope you keep reading!
Grace

Sonia says

+95 points for an original story with scientific interest and authentic Cold War detail despite belonging to the overdone YA magic genre. +5 for Southern California. -15 for making the Latin teacher the villain. -50 for a ridiculous Latin error. -50 for letting the otherwise wonderful illustrations be marred by SAME LATIN ERROR. +10 for Chinese character. -30 for describing Chinese character with hair like a "silken rope" and a "kung fu" kick. -15 for gratuitous sequel trolling. Sum: -50.

HEAR YE, AUTHORS AND EDITORS! Pay me to fix your Latin and Greek. Maile Meloy, I don't care if your brother is in the Decemberists. You have lost all cred with me. "Rectie"--well, that's just like forcing my mouth open and vomiting into it.

On a personal note, my copy of this book came from the Malden Public Library (via the main Boston branch). It was in Malden that my Chinese grandfather got into a fight with an Irish kid and, as a direct or indirect consequence, dropped out of school--never getting beyond approximately 10th grade. He died when I was 16, but I'm sure he would be glad that his granddaughter was fortunate enough to acquire so much education that it turned her into the pedant who wrote this.

Meaghan says

Fabulous read. Written for the young, enjoyable at any age. Please read my full review here: <http://cineastesbookshelf.blogspot.co...>

Anmiryam says

When literary writers shift gears into writing for young adults the enterprise is risky. Will they overload the narrative with complexities of language or ambiguities of perspective that swamp the action? Will they create central characters that are believably complex children or adolescents? In Maile Meloy's case the payoff was worth the risk, though any reader of her previous works would expect this to be the case. She is a writer of deceptive simplicity whose tales are full of details that are rich and make a powerful impression without being flashy.

In "The Apothecary" she has crafted a story that is adventurous and historical without being didactic -- the bleak post-war London she evokes with a few key words comes to life in sight, sound and smell; the story uses it's Cold War setting as a fabulous backdrop to make readers think about loyalty and moral choices without preaching. Her teenagers grapple with the feelings of no longer being children, but not really being adults and not always understanding adult motivations though they are beginning to realize they have power to act, even if they don't understand everything around them. The romance between the central characters feels true and undated, despite the nearly 60 years between the novel's 1952 setting and the present. And, even better, there's magic. Magic that works with the plot and with the characters, magic that feels magical and somehow realistic at the same time.

There are flaws, of course, but they are forgivable. Does literature need another cockney kid descended from the Artful Dodger (with the appropriately Dickensian name of Pip) who nearly steals the show? Probably not, but Pip is more than entertaining and you feel he deserves every bit of the energy Meloy invests into him. Are the bad guys too simply bad, the good guys too good and some of the plot twists too obvious? For me as an adult, perhaps so, but for a reader between the ages of 10 and 16, probably not. Is the framing device a bit clunky? Yes, but it's needed to tidy up what would have otherwise been some very messy loose ends.

Small reservations aside, I'm extremely glad that the door has been left open for sequels. Let's hope Meloy decides to walk through and bring us more Jainie and Benjamin, Pip and Sarah.

C.V. Sutherland says

I loved it. One of my all-time favorite books, because it's just the right blend of romance, fantasy, action and realistic fiction all together. After I finished, I just sat in a sort of daze, because I'd never been that affected by a book regarding emotions, period. It was amazing.

Abria Mattina says

I received an ARE of The Apothecary by Maile Meloy during a visit to the Penguin offices in New York. At first I put off reading it because I didn't feel tugged by the jacket synopsis, but once I started reading I couldn't put it down. This was one of those rare books that made me say, "Just one more chapter before bed...Okay, one more...Last one, I swear."

What I liked about The Apothecary from the very beginning was the voice of first person narrator Janie Scott. She's witty, intelligent, and she sounds like a realistic fourteen year old. I often find teenage protagonists flat or too juvenile, especially if they're in their early teens, but Meloy writes Janie with a relatable, appropriate narrative voice.

Also refreshing is male protagonist Benjamin Burrows, son of the apothecary and friend (and partner in crime) to Janie. In recent years, YA of this genre has been loaded to the brim with attractive-beyond-words, mysterious bad boy love interests. Benjamin is just the opposite, and that's incredibly refreshing. Instead of being withdrawn and mysterious, he's outspoken and determined. He isn't inaccessible to the heroine—except for the fact that they have some pretty big problems to solve that trump the pursuit of a romantic relationship, at least for now. There are, of course, things that Janie does not know about Benjamin, but their organically developing relationship reveals their pasts, their hopes and aspirations naturally.

Pip, a pickpocket and guttersnipe, has some of the best lines in the book. He is so distinct from every other character, so cocky and glib, that he infuses levity into an otherwise nerve-wracking adventure/mystery. And best of all, he has his place and does not stray from it. Meloy doesn't drag Pip into scenes where his unique brand of humor would seem out of place, such as during tense climactic drama. Some authors might be tempted to allow secondary characters like Pip to overstep their roles and overshadow the main characters, and I applaud Meloy for not doing so.

I really hope that this is the start of a series. The ending allows for an extension of the plot to further novels while still satisfying the reader, and I certainly wouldn't mind reading more about the adventures of Janie Scott and Benjamin Burrows, particularly if Pip comes along.
