



The House of the Scorpion

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With undertones of vampires, Frankenstein, dragons' hoards, and killing fields, Matt's story turns out to be an inspiring tale of friendship, survival, hope, and transcendence. A must-read for teenage fantasy fans.

At his coming-of-age party, Matteo Alacrán asks El Patrón's bodyguard, "How old am I?...I know I don't have a birthday like humans, but I was born."

"You were harvested," Tam Lin reminds him. "You were grown in that poor cow for nine months and then you were cut out of her."

To most people around him, Matt is not a boy, but a beast. A room full of chicken litter with roaches for friends and old chicken bones for toys is considered good enough for him. But for El Patrón, lord of a country called Opium—a strip of poppy fields lying between the U.S. and what was once called Mexico—Matt is a guarantee of eternal life. El Patrón loves Matt as he loves himself for Matt is himself. They share identical DNA.

The House of the Scorpion Details

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Author : Nancy Farmer

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From Reader Review The House of the Scorpion for online ebook

Kylee says

DUMBEST BOOK EVER!

Maxwell says

The House of the Scorpion is really unlike any YA/middle grade book I've ever read. It's extremely philosophical and thought-provoking, covering topics of the soul, identity, and human rights in a very intriguing way.

It takes place in some distant future where there is a land between the U.S. and Mexico that grows poppies for opium. The main character Matt is a clone of the leader of the nation named El Patron. El Patron seems kind and generous, giving his clone an education and privileges that other clones are not usually afforded. But as Matt gets older he begins to learn more about his life and his country's history that conflicts with what he has been told.

It's a tale of coming-of-age set against a survival/dystopian storyline with really complex material. I would be wary of giving this book to young readers, as it can be a bit graphic at times and deals with some sensitive issues. But I can imagine reading this book in middle school and having really great discussions surrounding it.

Apparently there is a sequel that I was told you don't have to read to get the whole story, but I'm very curious to see what happens next. So I plan on picking that one up eventually.

For fans of *The Chaos Walking Trilogy* and other dystopian/sci-fi/survival stories, this is a really great read, and I would recommend it.

Reynje says

[Or is that just me? (hide spoiler)]

Jason Kurtz says

Yeah, yeah, yeah. See the RACK of medals of the cover of this book? A friend told me she felt this novel changed the face of science-fiction. High praise indeed. I didn't buy the hype, and still have issues with the extremely slow start of this novel. It has been sitting on my desk for almost two years (no lie) and I finally read it.

After the first 80 pages of slow moving material, I finally became vested in the characters and thought the novel finally caught on. I think this novel probably does change the face of Sci-Fi for MG audiences, because the novel tackles some pretty high-brow concepts (modern slavery, cloning, organ harvesting, Communism, Marxism, Drugs and drug trafficking, addiction, adoption, forgiveness) and like Lois Lowry's

book *The Giver* Farmer does not shy away from these complexities.

I appreciated the way that Farmer finishes the book, unlike Lowry who closes with ambiguity, Farmer lays it all out on the table. Sequel??? I also predicted the ending with about 200 pages left to go in this book, which I guess is okay because I am a Sci-Fi aficionado and not a sixth-grader. The book for me as an adult probably would get a 3.5 stars, but I thought Farmer handled the material for her intended audience very well, hence the five star rating.

Wicked Incognito Now says

I HATED IT, and hated it on so many levels I truly do not know where to begin.

First of all, I will acknowledge one aspect of the story that I found positive. This is the story of Matt, a clone. Matt is raised in a shack on the opium plantation of drug lord, El Patron. He is El Patron's clone, grown for the purpose of being spare body parts for El Patron. In this world (the near future), clones are considered property, livestock. The embryos are implanted in cows, so the people of this world have come to the conclusion that anything born from cows is not human. After they are "born," their brains are purposely damaged so that the people can further consider these clones as beasts instead of human abominations of nature. This campaign of dehumanization has resonance throughout history. The Jews, the enslaved Africans in America, any person of possible Arab descent today....all of these races have undergone a campaign of dehumanization. Those in power subtly manipulated the general population until that population was able to excuse widespread cruelty in their own minds. We always look at those historical periods with disgust and wonder how anyone could ever accept that level of cruelty, and yet it happens over and over again throughout history.

A few reasons why I did NOT like this novel:

1. The author cannot seem to find her main point or theme. If her theme is the importance of individuality, I think she fails. The book ends with something that completely negates a theme that highlights the importance of individuality---so it can't be that.
2. The author's knowledge of cloning is all wrong. She attempts to sway her audience against the entire IDEA without fully understanding the concept. Clones would not be exact copies of their DNA donors. Environment is almost as largely responsible for who we are as our DNA is. At one point, I think she is going to explore this knowledge further, but I ended up being convinced that she just doesn't KNOW that even PHYSICAL traits are affected by environmental factors. Fingerprints are even affected by the force and pressure of things happening in the womb. Identical twins have the same DNA, and yet they are not identical. The same basic principles apply to clones. So, the thing that happens at the end...impossible.
3. The plot is all over the place. It has no direction.
4. The characterizations are flat. The emotions are hollow. The reader has no background for anyone, or sense of setting.
5. The author breaks the cardinal rule of writing: "Show! Don't tell!!!" She tells and tells and tells, but never SHOWS us anything. For instance, we are TOLD that the character of Steven is "okay." He's apparently the one character in this drug lord's family that is not evil. Yet, we are not SHOWN this. Why is Steven "okay?" How does Matt know this? Then, when Steven betrays Matt, are we supposed to be appalled? We have no

emotional attachment to Steven. Why did we think he WOULDN'T betray Matt?

6. Like I said, there is no continuity. No over-arching theme. After leaving the compound, Matt goes to another country. Once there it seems that this story is devolving into a diatribe on socialism. Which, irritated me INCREDIBLY. I couldn't be more sick of this "evils of socialism" storyline. However, at least going on about socialism was giving this novel a POINT!!!! YET, it didn't commit to the evil socialism theme. It turned out that the government was something else entirely. So, I don't know what that bit about the socialist orphanage was. It was completely out of place.

Then....the story devolved further....and went a place that left me completely flummoxed and angry that I wasted my time with this horrible written dreck (Matt at one point says: I was, quite literally, the underdog. Oh really Ms. Author? Was he LITERALLY an underdog? Not figuratively?).

Ultimately, I am most angry that this type of fiction is winning awards. That our children are assigned badly-written propaganda to read in high school English instead of quality literature.

Neal Shusterman says

One of the best young adult novels I've ever read.

Emily May says

This book has been on my goodreads shelf since pretty much the beginning of time... so why on earth have I been wasting my time with every other poorly-constructed dystopian world instead of reading this? I have absolutely no excuse: I own a copy, it's won practically every award going, and all my reviewer friends have been constantly singing its praises. Perhaps I am way more influenced by title and cover than I like to admit - though there's nothing actually *wrong* with either, I still feel like this doesn't scream at me "awesome dystopian setting + interesting questions about what it means to be human!!". It's good. Really good. If you liked Unwind, then you should also like this.

I loved the setting - Mexico - and it was obvious to me that the author was very familiar with Mexican culture and legends, she incorporates a lot of this into the story. I suppose one of the quickest ways to mess up your novel is to write about places and things you don't have a clue about, but I still really wish more authors would try to use different settings. There's a whole world out there that I'm not in a position to explore right now so I like to pretend I'm there by visiting other countries in books. Plus, is it that hard to do a little research on a country's culture, traditions and legends (etc.)?

In *The House of the Scorpion* we are immediately introduced to a boy called Matt who is a clone that was grown in a cow and harvested. The man who shares his DNA is El Patron, the extremely rich head of a huge opium empire and a man with the power to deliver to himself a longer than usual life with the help of clones. Matt's relationship with El Patron is conflicted. On one hand, Matt knows he is evil and corrupt - he plants chips in people's heads to make them obey his orders without question - but Matt also knows that El Patron is

himself. They are both intelligent and talented individuals, Matt acknowledges multiple times how alike the two people are. But Matt is treated by others as an animal, they do not see how anything grown in a cow can be human and some of the treatment he endured really pissed me off, never mind the fact that his genetic make-up is identical to El Patron's.

Matt questions himself and the world around him throughout the book. He finds it hard to believe that El Patron could possibly mean him harm - because how could you harm yourself? It's also a look at what makes someone human and how easy it is for people to dehumanize and convince themselves that a person is nothing more than an animal.

The House of the Scorpion, in my opinion, could only be improved by removing that chunk of story after (view spoiler). It felt at odds with the rest of the book and it was clearly the author's attempt to quickly drop in one more big issue - socialism - but it just felt forced and wasn't needed, it's not like we don't already have enough to go on with all the ethical questions flying around in this novel. Take that out and this book would be five stars. But anyway, it's still a really great story about cloning and about humanity that will probably make you want to punch several of the characters at times. But, as with Sisters in Sanity, I seem to like books that make me furious, guess they just make me care more.

Cindy Newton says

I read this to preview for future class use, and I'm very enthusiastic about possibly using it as a whole-class read in the future. It's chockfull of great issues to be explored in class discussions and writing assignments. Best of all, it is a compelling story that will definitely engage even our more reluctant readers.

In addition to that, I enjoyed it personally. Farmer creates a dystopian world that is believable due to the fact that it is based on so many of the issues we are dealing with today: illegal drugs, powerful drug cartels, illegal immigration, and cloning. It also addresses more universal themes such as the desire for acceptance, the effects of loneliness and isolation, the limits of love and loyalty, etc. Our kids would not find it hard, I believe, to make the connections between the themes in this book and those of the classic literature we read. We would also be able to explore these topics in more depth through non-fiction pieces during our research unit.

Aside from the bounty of educational uses, it's just a great story that keeps you turning the pages! I'd like to read the sequel and see what happens next. That really says it all, doesn't it?

Esther says

Recommended to me by my teenaged son, the book had a promising start and an interesting middle, but it all kind of fell apart towards the end and finished with a very unsatisfying ending. I liked the ideas presented about prejudice and predetermination vs. self-determination, and about the relative values of evil. The book is chock-full of evil-doers, some of whom are despicable, some of whom are loved, and one, the most interesting character of them all, Tam Lin, who is a compelling mixture of sin and repentance, loyalty and betrayal, an evil-doer who also manages to be a good man.

It felt like after presenting all her ideas and laying out the moral dilemmas, the author kind of ran out of steam and dashed off an ending that, I suppose, she figured would tie up all the loose ends, but really leaves just about everything hanging.

For instance, in a workhouse/orphanage setting that makes the Dickens orphans look positively privileged (at least they get *genuine* gruel), we are let to believe that all abuses will be corrected once one of the orphans manages to get word out that they are being mistreated. I guess the world would be a much better place than is portrayed in this book (or in reality, for that matter) if that was all it took to overcome evil and corruption.

Jack says

A really hit and miss book, with some terrific ideas and terrible plotting.

The main character, Matt, is a clone of the world's biggest drug kingpin, the 140+ year-old El Patron. Matt lives in El Patron's sprawling estate and is hated by most of the residents there, aside from his care-taker Celia and El Patron himself, who is raising Matt for his own sinister reasons. Soon, these reasons are revealed and Matt's only hope is to escape.

This felt like it should have been at least twice as long. The author, Nancy Farmer has developed an intriguing world, extrapolating from the US and Mexico's current problems with drugs, illegal immigration, and pollution, and also addresses ethical and legal issues around cloning. However, as compelling as this world is, it never feels real or adequately developed, and she has a ridiculous habit of explaining important aspects of how the world she has created operates at just the time they become pertinent to the plot. The characters are a mixed bag as well: they're likable and believable except when they're not, and turn from fully-realized creations to cardboard cut-outs whenever they have to do something that advances the story.

This isn't to say that I didn't like the book, necessarily. It was a great coming of age story, and I think that young teenagers will really enjoy the characters and the action. This book also won a whole mess of awards, which admittedly may color my reaction to it. I just wish that more time had been spent developing the characters, the world, and the mess of ideas that were introduced.

Zoë says

The house of the Scorpion is a book about a clone named Matteo Alacran. He was cloned from El Patron and harvested from a cow. His mother like figure is a woman named Celia. When Matteo, "Matt" lives with Celia he doesn't understand that he is different from everyone else. When he is brought from his little house in the poppy field to "The Big House," his life changes for the better and worse. He meets a girl he likes, named Maria, who also likes him, but he is treated like dirt from all of the other people living in the house. For six months he lives like an animal, until the day Maria's father sends El Patron a letter explaining to him what has been happening to his clone. When El Patron comes to "The Big House", everything is changed, and whenever El Patron is around Matt, he is treated like a regular person, but when he is gone, Matt is back to being treated like dirt.

This is a book that is full of suspense, action, mystery, and even a bit of horror. This book will make you cry and make you laugh, but no matter what you will definitely enjoy this book. I am not a reader, and I love this book even though it is so long. This is probably the best book I have read in a very long time and I suggest this book to everyone. This is a fictional book, but it is written so well that even though you know everything is fake, you still feel so bad for Matt. When your reading this book it's so intense so you feel like you are part of the book, and that is my opinion of The house of the Scorpion.

Maddie L says

This book was very slow and boring at the beginning, but as I went on I started really enjoying it. I recommend it for people, but if you do decide to read it give it time before you decide you don't like it.

Linda says

This is one of the almost perfect books written for young adults. It is an exciting story that will keep you turning the pages, but it also makes you think about the world we live in. It is a Newbery and Printz honor book and winner of the National Book Award.

In the House of the Scorpion, Nancy Farmer tells the story of Matt, the clone of 142-year-old El Patron, dictator of Opium, a country between the United States and Aztlan. In Opium, clones have one purpose, to extend the lives of those whose DNA they possess by providing them with a source for spare parts. The brains of most other clones are destroyed at birth, but Matt's is left intact on the orders of El Patron. At the beginning of the novel, Matt knows none of these things. He is cared for in isolation by El Patron's cook, Celia, who loves him. He only becomes aware that he is different from other people when he becomes a resident at El Patron's estate where he is viewed not as a human, but as an unclean animal without a soul. Matt is educated and lives in luxury, but is looked on with disgust by most of the estate's inhabitants. The exceptions are Celia, El Patron's bodyguard Tam Lin, and Maria, one of the children who discovered him. These three people see the humanity in him and teach him to be a good person.

Farmer does a masterful job of creating the world that Matt lives in from the cloning technology to the old fashioned ways on the estate which is designed to replicate the Mexico of El Patron's youth over 100 years ago. El Patron has made his fortune capturing Mexicans attempting to cross the border into the United States and using them to grow opium. To ensure that they don't escape, implants in their brains make them completely devoid of free will to the extent that they will not eat or drink without being told to do so. The threat of being turned in to one of these "eejits" is sufficient to allow El Patron to control others. The reader's interest is sustained by discovering along with Matt and from his point of view, the workings Opium, his purpose in life, and his ultimate fate. With the help of Celia and Tam Lin, he escapes to Aztlan where he is no longer treated as subhuman, but is captured and forced to labor with other orphans under the control of guards called "keepers" who relentlessly practice behavioral control methods to keep the young workers at the plankton factory in line. This is a coming of age story with a difference.

House of the Scorpion is a chilling story because Farmer portrays a world that just may be possible. Cloning is already a reality. There are people in today's world just as invisible to the larger society as the orphans. Child slavery exists. Environmental degradation is occurring. Matt's escape from his future as a clone gives that reader hope that good will prevail in this world as well.

Flannery says

This book is great because:

1. It is a young adult book about, I kid you not, every social policy and -ism you can think of--drugs, slavery, cloning, classism, socialism, EVERYTHING
2. I read all 400 or something pages in a day

3. The story is really unique and I wasn't really sure what was going to happen

Anyways, it is basically the story of the clone of the biggest drug lord in a country solely made up of drug farms.

A few people on the book's goodreads page mentioned that the writing was not amazing but, to tell the truth, I never really noticed. And I read. A lot. Some of the female characters are a little bit annoying but that won't stop me from recommending this book to most of my reader friends.

Tatiana says

As seen on The Readventurer

Flannery made me do it and I am pleased that she did. I have no idea why I've been avoiding The House of the Scorpion for so long. Just look at its accolades - National Book Award Winner, Printz Honoree, Newbery Honoree. It practically has my name written on it.

But, is The House of the Scorpion worth such an overwhelming acclaim though?

I'd say, its first 215 pages and the last 20 are (ebook edition).

The first two thirds of the book are riveting. This story is not just a clone story. (For some reason, the majority of stories about clones focus on exactly the same things.) Yes, it is horrifying in how it examines the (familiar) debate about a clone's humanity and soulless(ful)ness. Matt is a clone and is defined by people around him as livestock, a source of body parts, and not a human being. (How can he be human if he was grown in and harvested from a cow?) Nancy Farmer takes Matt's character on a journey of self-discovery and self-awareness that allows him to accept that he is not what he is told he is, that he is as much of a human being as any person around him. It is a compelling journey, even though its sentiment isn't particularly new to me - I've read *Never Let Me Go* and watched *The Island*.

But, thankfully, there is more to distinguish The House of the Scorpion from similar stories.

First, the novel is set in Mexico (well, a future version of it). This country's life is written richly and authentically and never feels like just an exotic backdrop. I am no expert on Mexican culture though, so I might have felt that in awe of it as portrayed in *The House of the Scorpion* because of the narrator of the audio, who infused Mexican flavor into the story most organically.

Second, this is a story of a drug lord and his enslaved family. El Patrón feels he is owed a few generations worth of life, and he will stop at nothing to get what he thinks he is entitled to. Cloning is a part of his plan for immortality. It's in Matt's relationship with his master and owner where the story shines the most. How would a clone feel about the person who is identical to him, the source of his life? Would he be able to hate him, essentially hating himself? If a clone's genetic make-up is similar to that of a ruthless criminal, does it mean that this clone is destined to follow the same path and become the same vicious person? Or is there a way to break away from the prototype? And how would a master feel about his own clone? Would it be possible for him to treat this younger version of himself as an organ bank, or there exists a connection that is closer than even that between a father and a child? These questions had my brain working, and this part of the book was 5-star material for me.

But then came the escape part, in the last third of the book, and I found myself struggling with it. I was

bored, I didn't feel like those pages (3-months of Matt's life worth) connected well thematically with the overreaching story arc, I didn't think they were necessary, I didn't think that a whole set of new characters (including villains) needed to be introduced so late in the story, and I surely didn't think that anti-socialist rants needed to come into play. (How did they relate to Matt's journey?) I thought, those pages only occupied time with no real bearing on the rest of the novel. To me, those 80 pages could have been completely cut out.

Thankfully, the ending did save *The House of the Scorpion*. It happens so infrequently in books, but it did bring the story full circle to El Patrón, and it was satisfying. But that big chunk of the novel, unfortunately, made me much less willing to recommend it, even though during the first part of the book I kept thinking this novel would be a great fit for fans of *Unwind*. I might reread *The House of the Scorpion* in future, but I'll be sure to skip over a big part of it.
