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Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell



Synopsis

English magicians were once the wonder of the known world, with fairy servants at their beck and call; they could command winds, mountains, and woods. But by the early 1800s they have long since lost the ability to perform magic. They can only write long, dull papers about it, while fairy servants are nothing but a fading memory. But at Hurtfew Abbey in Yorkshire, the rich, reclusive Mr Norrell has assembled a wonderful library of lost and forgotten books from England's magical past and regained some of the powers of England's magicians. He goes to London and raises a beautiful young woman from the dead. Soon he is lending his help to the government in the war against Napoleon Bonaparte, creating ghostly fleets of rain-ships to confuse and alarm the French. All goes well until a rival magician appears. Jonathan Strange is handsome, charming, and talkative—the very opposite of Mr Norrell. Strange thinks nothing of enduring the rigors of campaigning with Wellington's army and doing magic on battlefields. Astonished to find another practicing magician, Mr Norrell accepts Strange as a pupil. But it soon becomes clear that their ideas of what English magic ought to be are very different. For Mr Norrell, their power is something to be cautiously controlled, while Jonathan Strange will always be attracted to the wildest, most perilous forms of magic. He becomes fascinated by the ancient, shadowy figure of the Raven King, a child taken by fairies who became king of both England and Faerie, and the most legendary magician of all. Eventually Strange's heedless pursuit of long-forgotten magic threatens to destroy not only his partnership with Norrell, but everything that he holds dear. Sophisticated, witty, and ingeniously convincing, Susanna Clarke's magisterial novel weaves magic into a flawlessly detailed vision of historical England. She has created a world so thoroughly enchanting that eight hundred pages leave readers longing for more. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'm giving Jonathan Strange a 5 for the simply reason that I thoroughly enjoyed it all the way through, but I'd warn all readers to be more wary than usual of reviews (including this one). More than many books, this one I think will be a matter of true personal taste and experience will be your only truly accurate guide. To begin with, Strange is often referred to as a "fantasy" novel, an "adult" Harry Potter (ignoring Potter's self-obvious claim to millions of "adult" readers). If you're expecting fantasy in the form of Harry Potter magic (though done by bigger people employing bigger words) or Lord of the Rings-like quests and elves, be advised neither is here. Fantastical might be a better genre-word here than "fantasy". There is certainly magic here, both human and faerie (very different forms), but when one of the major storylines is how magic has gradually disappeared from England and when one of the major characters has as his purpose the destruction (not Black Tower hordes of evil monsters destruction but economic, social, or legal destruction) of those who would become magician, as you might imagine there isn't a lot of magic going on, at least not for the first few hundred pages. Those looking for a lot of wand-waving or fireball-flinging would best look elsewhere. One of the signs of the book's maturity is that one can't really generalize too much about the magic in it. Magic is almost invisible in the beginning and near-constant toward the end. It is scholarly, bookish and tedious and also vigorous, physical and exciting. It is human and Faerie and a melding of the two. It is all-powerful (Spain complains about the rearrangement of several of their country's geographic landmarks) and ineffective (you can see visions in water but they seldom are helpful).

This book is hard to describe. In terms of genre, it is both fantasy and well-researched historical fiction, which makes it a rather rare bird. The writing style falls somewhere between Austen and Gaiman and Dickens. The plot is somewhat rambling and disjoint, forsaking the standard quest narratives; in some ways it is a fantastic history of England, in some ways a tale of rescue. If it is anything, it is the story of the relationship between the two title characters, but one of them is not even introduced for two hundred pages.. Unlike most of the better modern fantasy, this book is not a page-turner, and I mean that as a compliment; rather, it is a book to savor. Not that the plot isn't engaging - it is - but I frequently found myself comparing how many pages I'd read to how many I had left, deciding that I was burning through the book too quickly, and setting it down while I turned

the passages I'd just read over in my head. As befits a character-driven fantasy, almost all the characters are likeable, or at least understandable; even when they take larger-than-life action, they do so for incredibly human reasons. There are also a number of historical-character cameos, all of them well-drawn and believable.. I do not agree with Mr. Gaiman's statement that this is "the finest English novel of the fantasticke to appear in the past 70 years." Tolkien is better; his work has an epic grandeur that this book lacks, perhaps because Susanna Clarke so realistically and concretely evokes the precise historical era at which she aims : the imagination has a somewhat wider canvas to paint on when reading Tolkien or similar high fantasy, with more blank space to be filled in by the reader.

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