

Boundary: The Other Horizons Trilogy – Book One by Mary Victoria Johnson

4 stars

A promising debut skilfully blending suspense and the supernatural

Penny and her five friends live in an isolated Victorian Gothic mansion surrounded by a dense forest. All their material needs are met: new clothes and good food, as well as lessons and books from which they learn about the outside world.

However, it is clear from the outset that there is a dark underpinning to this tale. For the fifteen years of their lives, Penny and the other children have been confined to the house and its grounds, forbidden to venture beyond the Boundary, an invisible, impenetrable, deadly entity that surrounds the estate. The only other people they have ever seen are Beatrix, the sixty-year-old housekeeper, tutor and cook, and the terrifying, sadistic figure known as the Master, who rules their lives with seemingly omnipotent means of magic at his disposal.

Increasingly stifled by captivity, Penny's strange dreams and yearning for freedom lead her to question why she and the others are being kept inside the Boundary. Her rebellion sets off a chain of events that shatters the children's hermetic existence. Secrets, mysteries, mistrust and betrayal ensue as a sinister battle of wills begins to threaten the very lives of Penny and the other children. Can Penny outwit the forces behind the Boundary, and save herself and her friends before it is too late?

The plot moves at a fairly slow pace but this serves to heighten the tension, adding intrigue and curiosity, and it is full of unexpected twists. The reader is drawn in to share Penny's frustration as she navigates her everyday existence while trying to solve the mystery of the bizarre world around her. When the action occurs, it is both shocking and exciting, increasing the suspense. The uneasy atmosphere of the beautiful mansion and forest is effectively conveyed, lending the story the essence of a dark fairy tale. While the villains remain opaque, the children are well-drawn, though occasionally jarring in the way they speak: sometimes they sound too young for their age and at other times too old. However, this works in context: having known no one but each other, it makes sense that they would not be like other children and would have their own unique way of talking.

All in all, this is an excellent first novel and one recommended for Young Adult readers. The final twist and cliffhanger are superbly rendered, which bodes well for the sequel. It has to be said that the book is in serious need of a proof-reader; there are many glaring spelling and grammatical errors throughout. However, this does not detract from the quality of the content nor the writing style of a very promising young author.

Arwen Evenstar

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review