

The Forgotten Palace: An Adventure in Presadia by Luke Aylen

5 stars

Delightful children's fantasy novel with real-world relevance

Fourteen-year-old Antimony is a dwarf, unlike other dwarves. Too tall to work in the mines, unable to grow a beard, yet exceptionally quick-minded, and brilliant with numbers and calculations, he has always known that he is different – that his abilities and reactions were at odds with those around him. His world is the kingdom of Presadia, a kingdom from which the king has long been exiled, having been betrayed by his closest ally, known as the Vengeful Servant or the Usurper. Presadia is now a land in which the dwarves became wealthy selling weapons, causing war and bloodshed, and resulting in an influx of desperate human refugees into their city of Val-Chasar.

However, the dwarves, now aware of their destructiveness and greed, welcome the humans into their city and care for them. Not only have castles and villages been destroyed, and crops and fields burned, but a blackening disease that kills trees and plants is spreading across Presadia, and yellow mists linger in the air, causing sickness and ill health in the population. One day, in the aftermath of a battle, Antimony rescues a strange raggedy man who charges him with piecing together the shards of a mysterious mirror. When Antimony brings the pieces back together, he discovers the mirror is so much more than the sum of its parts – and that if he can rise to the challenge, it could change the future of Presadia ...

It isn't necessary to have read the first novel in the series, *The Mirror and the Mountain*, to enjoy this second book. The events of the previous novel which lead directly to the story in this one are skilfully evoked where necessary. The world of Presadia is beautifully and imaginatively drawn, from the spectacular dwarf canyon city of Val-Chasar to the ancient forest, to the haunting ruins of the Forgotten Palace itself. More importantly, the characters are well-rounded – the hero Antimony, his dwarf mother Opal, a human heroine named Zil, a wise woman and village leader with the wonderful name of Hazel Crumpetbottom, and a magma-worm called Sparks (who has a lovely sub-plot which proves pivotal) are all sympathetic and engaging.

What makes this novel stand out are the real-world issues it encourages its young readers to think about. Embracing differences in people, and the beauty and importance of those differences. Building things up instead of tearing things down. The value of community and collectivism: of people – no matter what their race, sex or walk of life – working together, standing together, and uniting in common cause. The necessity of kindness, not greed; responsibility, not selfishness; compassion, not cruelty. And the imperative for all of us to respect and protect the natural world. A delightful book highly recommended for younger readers.

Arwen Evenstar

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