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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Almost Demon: Chamber One of the Sigil Cycle

A. J. Salem
Salem Books (Oct 31, 2013)
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A snarky young protagonist facing a mystical world with a realistically unsure attitude makes this chilling novel an enjoyable read.

In A. J. Salem's debut novel, *Almost Demon*, Gemma discovers she was born to be a summoner of angels and demons, and it's up to her to save the town from a supernatural infestation. With a little romance, a lot of mystery, and a blurred line between angel and demon, Salem creates a world that pulls the reader in and doesn't let go until the last page is turned.

Gemma Pope's senior year was set up to be the best yet: she was a cheerleader, her twin brother was the star quarterback, and they had a close-knit group of fantastic friends. Then the accident happened. When her brother and her two best friends were killed, everyone blamed her. At the same time, creepy black ghosts began slinking around town.

This first volume in the Sigil Cycle series is an action-adventure fantasy that establishes a quick pace right from the start. In the first fifty pages, Gemma is attacked by her brother's possessed former girlfriend, meets the hot new boy in school who shows her a portal to other dimensions, survives the local librarian going postal in the middle of story time, and finds herself the only member of a mysterious new teacher's "book club," in which she studies an ancient book of magic and practices summoning demons.

Occasionally, the action can move a little too fast, and the characters' reactions and emotions feel glossed over. In one scene, Gemma and Thom, her English teacher and summoning guide, get into an argument. For the first time, she sees evidence that Thom may be more than human: "Flames appeared in his eyes that scared me to no end." However, there is no further mention of her fear, and she continues the argument in the same manner as before. Her fear with "no end" seems to disappear quickly.

Small criticisms aside, Salem's book possesses an exciting plot with unique characters. Whether demon, angel, human, or otherwise, each character has his or her own distinct personality that isn't necessarily what one would expect. For instance, there's a boy angel with a tattered robe and a nail-biting habit who blithely refuses to help rid the town of aggressive spirits; and there's a beady-eyed, overweight demon in a mustard-colored suit and purple shirt trying to kick a smoking habit who likes to call Gemma "chicky." Gemma herself has a snarky sense of humor that makes her fun to read, and her unsure attitude toward learning about the supernatural makes her relatable, while still appearing admirable for her strength in moving forward in the aftermath of the fatal car accident.

Almost Demon catches readers' attention with its spooky cover art, hooks them with a suspenseful back cover blurb, and reels them in with an exciting, fast-moving plot and interesting, likable characters. Readers will be eager to see which main characters will return for the next volume in the series and what new supernatural beings will try to raise hell on earth.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (November 11, 2013)

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