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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ JUVENILE FICTION

Charlie and the Ice Dragon: The Secret Realm

Gary R. J. Hopkins
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In this grand romp through the realm of dragons, griffins, and unicorns, Gary R. J. Hopkins brings to life a ten-year-old boy's imaginings and takes readers along for the magnificent, if not perfectly polished, ride.

Hopkins opens *Charlie and the Ice Dragon: The Secret Realm* on a normal day in a boy's life. Charlie Travis is going to his grandmother's house for summer vacation, where he expects total tedium. But after spending an afternoon in the mysterious west woods with his new friend, Peter, boredom is the last thing Charlie has to worry about.

The boys soon find themselves in a world of ice that seems to be melting upon their arrival. Displaying a delightful mix of bewilderment and excitement, Charlie and Peter take on each challenge that comes their way. Peter provides the perfect foil to Charlie's gung-ho attitude—for instance, suggesting that riding on the back of a flying dragon maybe isn't the safest thing to do. The boys' camaraderie is evident in their easy banter and unswerving loyalty to one another.

There is, of course, a quest, and a realm to be protected from the evil intentions of The Dark One. Shades of Harry Potter crop up throughout, from the unnamed villain to Charlie's identity as "the chosen one," and to the jagged, Daily Prophet-worthy font of the chapter titles. Hopkins's story is not as psychologically complex or lengthy as the Harry Potter stories, though. This is simply a kid's fantasy come true, with vast legions of elves, dwarfs, and dragons rushing into battle alongside boys wearing silver and gold helmets, wielding jewel-encrusted swords and exhibiting limitless bravery.

Hopkins alternates the sweeping battle scenes with humorous interludes that provide comic relief from the drama. Azrimore, the ice dragon who accompanies the boys on their adventure, has a stunning ability to pull entire meals from under his scales, for instance. Azrimore's dubious code of honor, along with Peter's willingness to say whatever is on his mind, keep things real in a land populated by barons, lords, kings, and princes given to planning their days based on magical prophecies.

The action moves along swiftly as Charlie leads his diverse troops in the struggle to vanquish evil, but grammatical problems hamper the flow of the words. Sentence fragments create a sort of stutter; the reader is frequently compelled to mentally join two incomplete sentences into one that makes more sense. Other irregularities create similar stumbling blocks, such as varied spellings of the same word, inconsistent capitalization of proper names, and unnecessary use of apostrophes in plural nouns.

These easily addressed linguistic discrepancies, however, don't stop Charlie's dream world from materializing on the pages of this first book in Hopkins's planned series. *The Secret Realm* is a great quick read for boys looking for a way to perk up the long, lazy days of summer.

SHEILA M. TRASK (June 25, 2013)

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