

Eliza and the Alchemist

Carlos Lacámara

Fixed Mark Productions

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In the fantasy novel Eliza and the Alchemist, a student enters a mysterious new world in which the lines between what's real and imagined are blurred.

In Carlos Lacámara's fantasy novel *Eliza and the Alchemist*, a mysterious magician is painstaking in his efforts to bring people back from hell using the elixir of life.

Eliza is tired of her mundane lifestyle and of boys who look perfect but arouse no interest in her. She is on the verge of giving up on romance when a peculiar but handsome professor walks into her classroom, speaking a language that no one understands. Her investigation into him uncovers a sinister world of sorcery, demons, and dead people being brought back from hell. Though such elements were once invisible to her, she's forced to face them and seek understanding about her history and why she can see what other people can't.

The absurdist plot unfolds via multiple at first unconnected points of view. The characters, while their qualities are exaggerated, are vibrant and diverse. There is irony in Eliza's dismissal of nerdy Ethan, who pines after her while looking for ways to prove his love to her, only for her to fall into the same situation, following her new professor around like a lovesick teenager trying to get his attention. Ethan even undertakes a mission to rescue Eliza, whom he believes has been bewitched and turned into a sex slave, resulting in sticky and embarrassing situations. Still, these alternating viewpoints lead to gaps in the narrative that persist through much of the book.

The book is subdivided into three portions, but they don't fully coalesce until late in the book; the middle portion functions almost as if it were a separate story. Moving from Eliza and her sudden partnership with her professor, wherein they explore sorcery and the afterlife, the narrative jumps back to the founding days of Hollywood to cover the reinvention of a man whose life was ruined by a deceitful woman and her jealous fiancé. Further, the attention-grabbing prologue, in which gang members are commissioned to kill a man for a mysterious client, creates misleading impressions about what's to come. However, the prose is detailed and descriptive, resulting in a clear sense of Eliza's world. And the story's conclusion ties up the loose ends, reconciling the otherwise disconnected elements and revealing their importance to Eliza's overarching story.

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GABRIELLA HARRISON (February 8, 2023)

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