

Excerpts from an Unknown Guidebook, Book 1: Phases of the Moon

Josef Bastian

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Josef Bastian's *Excerpts from an Unknown Guidebook* is a polished, thoroughly engaging fantasy for tweens and young adults.

Aaron Anderson seems ordinary in every way—until he learns he's been chosen to succeed his grandfather Pap as a Folkteller, the person who “tells the stories that must be told” to keep evil at bay.

Aaron's training begins with a cleverly riddled adventure that lands him and his best friend Jake in another dimension. There they meet Wendy Perrault, a student Folkteller from a parallel universe. When Aaron and Jake are attacked by suffocating, cold-as-ice embodiments of evil known as the Shadow People, Wendy helps them escape and is accidentally transported back to Earth with the boys.

The basics of the story are deliciously embellished with all sorts of complications. Wendy needs to return to her own universe, but she will have only one chance to do so, when the transit portal opens on a narrow window of escape. Aaron's special status as a Folkteller-in-training threatens his long-standing friendship with Jake. The Shadow People, aware that Pap's powers are waning while Aaron's are still developing, are planning to wage a final, all-out war of destruction.

The plot establishes itself quickly, setting a fast pace that never falters. There's a refreshing absence of overlong setups, and the writing is light rather than portentous, with touches of humor. Descriptions of the Shadow People, the alternate dimension, and magical books of Folkteller tales are vivid and woven seamlessly into the action.

Characters are also deftly drawn. Part of what keeps the plot absorbing is that each character is given problems to work through. Pap isn't completely sure that his plan for getting Wendy home will work. Aaron questions whether he's really cut out to be a Folkteller. Wendy and Jake form a romantic attachment that creates tension as the propitious date for Wendy's return looms.

The first book in a projected series, *Excerpts from an Unknown Guidebook* sets a high standard to follow.

SUSAN WAGGONER (July/August 2018)

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