

Sansablatt Head

Joan Spilman

CreateSpace (Oct 11, 2013)

Softcover \$11.95 (312pp)

978-1-4826-6895-7

Quelle is a fascinating place filled with giants, magic flowers, and sorcerers. This lush, rich fantasy is world-building done well.

In *Sansablatt Head*, Joan Spilman has created a lush, rich fantasy that takes middle-grade readers on a journey to Quelle, a magical land inhabited by giants, magical flowers, and powerful sorcerers. Along the way, the protagonist, seventh-grader Alec Mulroon, gains confidence and learns important lessons about himself and how to deal with people.

Alec is a troubled child; his minders and his teachers do the best they can to keep him in check, but being abandoned by his mother and harassed both at school and by his nannies take a toll. When Alec suffers humiliation at the hands of a ruthless teacher, he retreats into a depression that only lessens when an odd gift of a wooden head that his mother sends him from abroad turns out to hold Sansablatt, the imprisoned king of a faraway land.

Once Alec travels to Quelle with Sansablatt and Diogenes, a Neapolitan mastiff they pick up along the way, his character slowly changes and matures. Being responsible for Sansablatt in his current condition, locked inside a wooden replica of a head, gives Alec the self-confidence to grow and change.

Initially, Spilman is a bit didactic in her writing. The lessons that the adults attempt to teach Alec come across as hammer blows; the physical education teacher's lesson is particularly brutal and costs Alec his few friends. As the story progresses, however, we see that these lessons serve to put Alec in a place where he can appreciate Sansablatt's stories and his predicament, and lend a helping hand.

World-building is done well in this book. Quelle is a fascinating place with many nooks and crannies, and many different inhabitants. Initially, it may be difficult for early middle-level readers to keep track of all the ins and outs, but once Alec, Diogenes, and Sansablatt arrive, it all becomes clear.

Sansablatt's allies are a loyal and hardworking bunch. Their leader, Eugenia McPherson McNutt, is a force to be reckoned with and a brusque, but ultimately kindhearted, leader. The Skylls are Spilman's equivalent of sorcerers, and they wield intriguing powers such as the ability to open the "doors" to Quelle from Earth. The Water Skyll is particularly interesting with his mutable robe that shimmers and shines with all the colors of water.

There are five illustrations included, black-and-white pencil drawings that don't add much to the narration. Another minor issue is that each chapter is titled with the first few words of its initial sentence; chapter thirteen, for example, is titled, "The huge house stood in a clearing..."—which seems unnecessary.

In all, middle-grade students will enjoy this book.

LYNN EVARTS (January 23, 2014)

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