



★ **Skycircus**

Peter Bunzl

Jolly Fish Press (Feb 11, 2020)

Softcover \$12.99 (432pp)

978-1-63163-431-4

Full of dark thrills and derring-do, Peter Bunzl's steampunk fantasy *Skycircus* finds fourteen-year-old Lily receiving a personal invitation to Slimwood's Stupendous Traveling Skycircus, accompanied by a package that contains her mother's diary. Her curiosity piqued, Lily sneaks out to attend, only to be followed by her loyal friend, Robert, and Malkin, her mechanical fox. At the Skycircus, things aren't what they seem; when the big top's lights go down, Lily, Robert, and Malkin are pressed into the ride of their lives.

Externally unremarkable, Lily harbors a secret: she bears a clockwork heart instead of her own. The cogheart saved her life after the crash that took her mother's, but melding clockwork with living beings has been forbidden. While she worries about her secret, Lily also wonders if it should be secret at all, and whether there are others like herself who feel deep shame about their bodies, steeped in the knowledge that they're "freaks" who disturb the "normal" populace. When the Skycircus arrives, these questions reach their climax, and a dangerous escapade kindles new maturity in Lily and Robert.

The expansive cast all have dynamic narratives. Most compelling is Lily's self-interrogation and burgeoning consciousness about passing privilege and taboo differences. When she's kidnapped, Lily finds herself among other human-mechanical hybrids for the first time. While she worries about her secret and questions the idea of naturalness, *Skycircus* examines how scientific interventions that "meddle with what the great maker himself intended" allow people to become happier and healthier, even if those it saves are no longer quite as others expect.

A rollicking adventure story helmed by a plucky, imperfect heroine, a diligent, caring friend, and a smart-aleck fox, *Skycircus* embeds its rich steampunk Europe with issues of body and identity that are relevant in the modern zeitgeist.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (January / February 2020)

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