Clarion Review

Fantasy

Smoke and Magic: Freedom
Alexander Meyer
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

High school can be rough on socially awkward teenage boys. For bookish Charley Anderson, at age seventeen, his already loner tendencies become complicated by weird dreams, a sudden acquisition of powers, and an alarming physical transformation. He learns from a new neighbor, an odd fellow named Malcolm, that he and the old man are the last of a race of powerful, long-lived beings called Jinns, whom greedy humans like to enslave for personal gain. With Malcolm at his side, Charley must navigate the high-school arena, concealing his magic as he slowly transforms from a human into a supernatural being. Additionally, Malcolm and Charley must evade capture by the Windsors, an avaricious clan from whom Malcolm escaped thralldom. *Smoke and Magic: Freedom* is an engrossing debut fantasy from Alexander Meyer.

Any teen who has ever felt like an outcast will identify with the shy protagonist. Interestingly, the author takes Charley's timidity one step further and provides an accurate portrayal of social phobia. Charley's social invisibility does not stop the audience from caring about him, however, because he is an inquisitive, heroic nerd who cares deeply for his parents, Malcolm, and his best friend, Zack. Those who adore reading will be thrilled to note that Charley's bibliophilic tendencies make him stronger. As for Malcolm, the ancient Jinn's combination of wisdom, benevolence, and confusion about modern customs allows him to serve as Charley's mentor and provide comic relief while remaining likeable. Because Meyer fleshes out their personalities in nuanced ways, Charley's parents—attentive but not annoying—and Zack—appropriately confused and supportive—are also appealing.

However, one wishes that Meyer had given the Windsors similar depth. Compared to Charley's crew, the villainous men are flat. It is never entirely clear what the men plan to do with the Jinns if they catch them. Also, the baddies are not mentioned for long stretches of the book, and the way they are able to track and control the Jinns is confusing. The showdown

between the Windsors and Charley at the end of the novel lacks the expected level of drama, given that the Windsors are portrayed as incredibly menacing figures. An intriguing subplot involving the protagonist and a girl he likes is also unsatisfactorily resolved.

The main plot, however, unfolds at a pleasing clip. With Charley confronting a new challenge in each chapter, the narrative pace never flags. As the transforming teenager, the protagonist possesses the right balance of awe, amazement, sadness, and horror. In this dialogue-rich novel, the adolescents speak a believable, comprehensible teenage vernacular. As the novel closes, Meyer lays the groundwork for a sequel, which, one hopes, will be as exciting as the first installment.

Jill Allen