

Spun Sugar and Bootblack

Christoph James

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In the movie, *A Knight's Tale*, two men compete in a supposedly friendly jousting competition. Before the event, the antagonist of the film is given a regulation lance with a smooth, blunt head. His squire tells him that the lance head isn't real—it's made of spun sugar and bootblack. When the jousting competitor crushes the tip in his hand, he finds the lance has a far sharper tip, which will seriously wound, if not kill, his opponent.

In Christoph James' thriller, *Spun Sugar and Bootblack*, readers will also discover a darker tale hidden beneath less-threatening circumstances: how the quaint Scottish countryside conceals something unnatural, deadly, and downright evil.

It's a time of darkness in England and not just because the recently widowed Queen Victoria has retreated from public view. Nightmarish rumors are making their way back from Scotland. In response, the queen sends Branán Stoke there to investigate.

At the same time, Feargahall arrives in the Scottish border village of Dunradin. Wounded, he seeks assistance from his half-brother, Ronan, and warns him about the Teriz: unnatural, shape-shifting creatures that live underground and feed on human flesh. Now, the Teriz are starting to come above ground and the people of Dunradin are in danger. But trouble has already started as Tamlyn, Ronan's son, and his friends discover people mysteriously disappearing from the countryside. Soon, lines are drawn and challenges sent between the Teriz and the villagers; Branán, Ronan, and the rest of the village must find a way to stop the inevitable destruction.

From the opening pages, *Spun Sugar and Bootblack* grabs and doesn't let go due to James' mix of tense action, realistic dialogue, and concise description. For instance, in one scene where a wolf attacks a shape-shifting Teriz, James writes: "The scream began as a loud croaking call like that of a raven and rose in pitch, ending as the wail of a dying man. Domnash saw the wolf at the last second, and even then only as a shadow. The beast has crept up behind him as he stepped through the alley and pounced before his victim could take to the air. Feodor stared down from the height of the ladder, transfixed at the sight. The huge wolf shook his head as his fangs ripped into the chest of his victim."

James captures a unique voice in each of his characters, shaping and blending the thread of their lives into the central storyline. While certain readers may find it confusing to keep everyone straight, the narrative ultimately provides a well-rounded view of this dark, eerie world.

Anyone who is a fan of the vampire or zombie projects on the shelves of bookstores today will find *Spun Sugar and Bootblack* a nice addition to their reading list. But as the ultimate imagery of the book is about the inner reserves of people during hardship, it's an ideal book for anyone looking for a supernatural thriller.

KATERIE PRIOR (August 25, 2011)

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