

The Caves of Wonder

Kirsten Marion

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Four friends navigate a vibrant, magic-filled world and decide where their priorities lie in the fantasy novel The Caves of Wonder.

Kirsten Marion's Lucy and Dee fantasy novel *The Caves of Wonder* follows an eclectic group's quest to secure a magical ally and save their realm.

After a narrow escape from evil Queen Xixi, best friends Lucy and Dee, along with their new friend Mai and the undercover future emperor Yidi, are determined to stop her. They also hope to find a way for Lucy and Dee to return to their world. To do so, they travel across the world of Ashtarom to free the magical White Tiger, who is imprisoned in the Caves of Wonder.

The story begins with the four friends united in their cause. After becoming separated from Mai's grandfather Zixing, they agree that traveling to Rephar to seek the help of the monks is their best option. As the plot unfolds, however, each character is pulled in a different direction. Mai is drawn to ideas of revolution and change; Lucy is attracted to the possibility of becoming a witch and obsesses over her magic; Dee befriends natural philosophers and throws himself into experiments; and Yidi questions what it means to be a leader. These differing interests cause tension in the group that's never fully resolved. The children's inability to look past their own interests and their tendency toward unkindness detract from the nobility of their cause. The focus on these side quests also makes Lucy and Dee come across as insincere in their efforts to return home or find Dee's parents.

The secondary cast, though, is developed in pleasant, nuanced terms. Lucy's dragon Try-el is a delightful companion whose antics add levity. Sweet Emerald, one of the nomadic Moon people, teaches Lucy about the discrimination they face and forces Mai to confront her prejudice. And a young natural philosopher, Starbright, is on the verge of discovering gunpowder, leading Dee to question if it is possible to balance ethics and efficiency in warfare.

With the threat of capture by Queen Xixi's minions ever present, the plot maintains exciting urgency, even in slower scenes. The friends have several close calls with the queen's guards; they rely on the help of new allies to hide them. But fragmented and too-complex sentences distract from the book's progression, while awkward phrasing further muddles its flow. Additionally, bits of narrative interrupt the book's conversations, making them hard to follow.

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VIVIAN TURNBULL (September 5, 2023)

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