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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ JUVENILE FICTION

The Golden Spider

Dan Liberthson
CreateSpace (Jul 30, 2012)
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Well-developed characters and relationships between preteens makes for an exciting coming-of-age fantasy adventure.

Twelve and a half is a precarious age, on the cusp of adolescence, and for most kids, it's still a time of finding their own identity. Dan Liberthson places a group of preteens firmly in the spotlight in his adventure fantasy, *The Golden Spider*.

Jeremy Taylor's grandfather has died, his sister is in a near-comatose state, and his friend Zack is becoming increasingly ill-tempered. Jeremy soon finds out that these problems are being caused by the resurgence of an ancient force; this information comes to him through a creature named Alaikin, the "Golden Spider" of the book's title. Together with his cat (Cleopatra), Zack's sister, Sandy, and Alaikin, Jeremy attempts to defeat the force and restore balance to the world.

The Golden Spider is Liberthson's first children's book. He has published three illustrated books of poetry for adults and holds a PhD in English from SUNY Buffalo. However, Liberthson's greatest accomplishment in *The Golden Spider* lies not in his poetic sense but in the way he gets to the heart of young Jeremy's emotions. Jeremy's father is a tough but loving ex-military man, and Zack is a confident, sometimes arrogant genius; in contrast, Jeremy constantly doubts himself and his abilities. Jeremy's self-confidence grows, however, until he finally faces his ultimate test; this is all presented in a believable progression that will make readers want to root for Jeremy.

One of the standard clichés of fantasy: alien names that are difficult to pronounce (Ordúrrg-Zaikh, Tyrdd-cayzh, and Zhystrem Haistral, among others) can prove to be distracting. While some would consider this a fine game for the reader, it can prove to be a stumbling block to others. But this is a mild distraction, and fortunately, Liberthson does include a glossary of the "Primal Tongue" at the back of the book which provides pronunciations as well as definitions.

Overall, the writing is good, but there are a few troublesome passages with unclear antecedents. This requires some sentences to be read more than once to understand their meaning: "'Eating, petting, and sleeping, that's all you care about,' Jeremy thought. Cleo purred contentedly as his mother stroked her, and looked at Jeremy with queenly disdain."

But the book's strength comes from the interactions among the children and the tension arising from Zack becoming the primary instrument of the destructive force. Liberthson gives Zack a good reason to shadow Jeremy's every move, and it is these moments that propel the narrative.

Liberthson ends his tale with the possibility of future crises to emerge, perhaps once again requiring the assistance of Jeremy Taylor. It is likely that Liberthson's audience will come along for the ride, following Jeremy and his friends on further adventures, as both characters and readers progress into their teenage years.

PETER DABBENE (July 26, 2013)

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