

The Iron Labyrinth

Merrilee Beckman

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The Iron Labyrinth is a psychological fantasy novel in which a man who's forced to confront human nature comes to understand the price of pursuing his goals.

In Merrilee Beckman's fantasy novel *The Iron Labyrinth*, a man is enslaved in a dark kingdom that exists in the space between life and death.

Brian awakens in a strange land of iron walls and swirling blue mists. He is brought before Uncle, an enigmatic figure who rules over a massive labyrinth constructed of pure iron. Brian is renamed Colum and is forced into servitude, placed at the mercy of the whims of Uncle and the strange realm that the labyrinth seems designed to hold back. Grueling labor, fight training, and random psychological assaults break the slaves down and reforge them. Colum learns that escaping will first require submitting to Uncle so that he can learn more about the labyrinth and the other slaves.

Beginning in medias res, the novel reveals as much about the kingdom early on as Brian knows. Even as he teases out useful information, the murkiness of the atmosphere is maintained, and the ambiguity is captivating. Atmospheres, including those of the oppressive labyrinth and open London, are established through keen details. In the labyrinth, colorlessness, claustrophobia, and surreality pervade; the world above it is addressed through shocking contrasts.

Because Brian at first refuses to submit to Uncle, his decision to become Colum is painful; others endured similar treatment, and their situations help in understanding the threat that Uncle represents. Ample attention is given to each character, and the varying goals of the enslaved are shown to extend beyond mere survival. The only woman among them, Drevor, is present because of unrequited love; Brian's close friend in London, who discovers Brian's circumstances and sets out to save him, also stands out.

Colum and Uncle, whose exchanges are at first restrained and full of subtext, graduate to intense verbal sparring as the novel progresses; still, they never quite say what they'd truly like to. Heated, pointed discussions follow Brian's decision to become Colum, especially after Uncle lowers his guard. Most such conversations foreshadow the plot twists to come. The story is resolved in a powerful, transformative way.

Innumerable secrets exist in the kingdom of *The Iron Labyrinth*, a psychological fantasy novel in which a man is forced to confront human nature and comes to understand the price of pursuing his goals.

JOHN M. MURRAY (December 22, 2020)

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