

The Magic Keys of Tanglewood

Malcolm Chester

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In the supernatural novel The Magic Keys of Tanglewood, girls at a prestigious school pursue a generational mystery.

In Malcolm Chester's novel *The Magic Keys of Tanglewood*, girls at a prestigious private school uncover a curse that's plagued the institution for centuries.

The "fab four" is made up of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls: Skylar, Carly, Jade, and Peggy. They're students at Tanglewood, a school that Skylar's family opened generations before. Family folklore suggests that there's a curse on the school, placed there by a witch, Elizabeth, who was bullied and sought revenge. Girls go missing each year, and mysterious locks appear on the property without keys.

Carly, who is sensitive to supernatural energy, meets a ghost, Constance, who confirms that the missing girls, and the keys to their locks, are being kept in a realm between reality and magic that was created by Elizabeth long ago. Although they're busy with school work and budding relationships, the friends decide that they have the knowledge and power that's needed to search for the keys, break the curse, and free the missing girls of Tanglewood.

The girls are constructed using stereotypes. They spend their time discussing fashion, shopping, and boys, and they engage in constant cattiness and competition when it comes to looks and love. Individually, Skylar is brooding and mysterious; Carly is sweet and psychic; Jade is boy crazy, and develops a cheerleading routine involving sexy underwear; Peggy is underdeveloped and less involved in the story. The boys in the book are of similar stock, exhibiting a sense of possession over their girlfriends. They take a lazy attitude where romance is concerned, and are prone to violence when others seem interested in their girlfriends.

Further, one teenage boy is described as a "potent sex symbol"; the novel's frequent sexualization of minors is uncomfortable and awkward. And secondary to the main plot, the girls deal with a bully, whom they say can join their group if she loses weight; while this is framed to be encouraging, the interaction swells with fat shaming and harmful beauty standards. Stilted character exchanges cement the book's reigning sexism and heteronormativity.

Although the group finds out about the curse and meets Constance early in the novel, there is no sense of urgency when it comes to finding the keys or saving the lost girls; instead, the teenagers spend most of their time concentrating on school and inventing scenarios to test the loyalty and interest of their boyfriends. When the in-between world is finally entered, many new, underexplained characters are introduced, including the evil witch Elizabeth. The supernatural elements of Elizabeth's world and her powers are underdeveloped, though they lead to active fighting scenes. Still, the book's casual approach to crises dulls the book's drama and potential to be surprising.

In the novel *The Magic Keys of Tanglewood*, girls at a prestigious school pursue a generational mystery, pointing to further adventures.

DELIA STANLEY (July 20, 2021)

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