ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

JUVENILE FICTION

The Skull
Elizabeth Knight
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Quick-moving and continuously intriguing, this creepy mystery will hook and hold young readers.

Elizabeth Knight's first young-adult novel is a suspense-driven tale that follows a young boy as his scruples are tested by a mysterious talisman and a dangerous newcomer.

As the story opens, the reader finds its popular protagonist, Josh, and his friends playing in an overgrown English park. At its center stands an old forester's cabin, now inhabited by witchy Old Nancy and her host of cats. Josh falls upon a cat's skull in the muck of the yard, a moribund item to which he is inexplicably drawn.

Once he gets the skull home, Josh begins to suspect that its pull on him is attributable to its special powers, a conclusion reinforced by Old Nancy's dismay over losing it. Josh, though, isn't the only one who thinks the skull may have magical qualities. Kevin, the sullen loner who's new at school, also finds himself coveting the object, and Josh finds that Kevin will do anything to wrestle it from him.

Josh suddenly finds himself in the midst of a Machiavellian scheme. Kevin manipulates Josh's friends, turning them against him, all in an effort to steal the skull. After school one day, Josh is surrounded by those once closest to him, and the ensuing beating is severe. At its conclusion, Kevin has the skull and power over most of the school.

But Josh, teaming with the two pragmatic old souls among his classmates, Henry and Alisa, comes to realize that everyone will be much better off if the skull is returned to Old Nancy, the only person in town who seems to know how to handle its power. They launch a well-thought-out counteroffensive. The latter part of the book is devoted to its events, as well as to some harrowing situations that follow a shift in the middle school's power scheme.

Though readers never learn exactly why the skull is imbued with so much supernatural importance, this mystery is quick moving and continuously intriguing. It reads like a

contemporary answer to Mary Downing Hahn's eerie tales. Readers may be jarred by its abrupt beginning, which leaves no room for engaging Josh's backstory, but those willing to hop on board anyway won't be disappointed.

Josh grapples with troubles that will be familiar to many teens, including bullying and the fast-shifting tides of teenagers' affections, and meets these challenges with a maturity beyond his years. The relative darkness of *The Skull* and its central themes are tempered by explorations of right and wrong, as well as by melancholia-colored musings on who and what we leave behind as we grow.

Michelle Anne Schingler