

The Spell

C. V. Shaw

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With story lines that warn against focusing too much on the future and not enjoying the present, The Spell is a captivating fantasy novel.

In C. V. Shaw's endearing fantasy novel *The Spell*, a curse befalls a royal family and thrusts the entire kingdom into an adventure that spans generations.

In an alternate version of 1500s England, King Maurice and Queen Lilac rule over peaceful Fleurham. But a fateful encounter with a strange bird, and the attempted assassination of Princess Isabella, propels their royal family into darkness. To rescue Isabella from the clutches of an unknown curse, the king disappears into the surrounding forest, seeking any means of help. Months pass, and the king is nowhere to be found. As the royal family threatens to crumble from within, others find themselves swept up in strange and unusual adventures themselves, including the castle steward, Johndor, and the bickering witches who call the forest home.

Isabella and her curse are the driving force of the narrative, but secondary characters often steal the focus. Johndor and his family, who live and work within the castle, have a startling history related to their beloved queen; a pair of women known for their magical prowess have rich backstories filled with intrigue and backstabbing; and the king's lifelong horse, Isiah, meets a tragic fate. Each of these disparate plot lines connect in surprising ways. Meanwhile, the truth behind the curse is obscured, though a charlatan witch's antics hint at a possible explanation and cure.

The novel blends elements of magical realism and historical fantasy in an intriguing way, with a firm eye on the wondrous: Isabella is cursed by a magical arrow, Isiah combats ethereal hummingbirds, and King Maurice succumbs to a half-baked spell hidden within an everyday item. Sensory details, as of the crunch of leaves and the incessant buzzing of a fly, capture the imagination, making otherwise ordinary scenes feel magical.

But there are abrupt narrative shifts that compromise the book's tension: the story leaps forward after the curse is revealed, and a significant amount of time is skipped over. A flashback to the events leading up to the assassination attempt comes without warning or enough context; while it fills in interesting details, it also compromises attention. Further, the book's characterizations are at first limited to fairy tale tropes, with people defined according to their roles or positions in society; as the book continues, their nuances are better revealed, and they come to hold more individualized attention. This is especially true of Johndor, who is revealed to be burdened by his tragic past and driven to protect those whom he considers family.

As its characters learn that you can't protect against destiny, and that attempting to change the future results in painful present circumstances, they also come to accept difficult realities. At its end, the story is rounded and satisfying, with the truth about Isabella's curse revealed in full.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (November 3, 2020)

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