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Juvenile Fiction

The Witch in the Lake
Anna Fienberg
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The witch, “darkness knitted together, a thousand nights sewed into blackness without stars,” inhabits the lake near the small Italian village where the young friends, Leo and Merilee, live in 1540.

Generations of Leo’s family have practiced wizardry. Merilee’s family includes the unpleasant Aunt Beatrice, who is from the order of the Wise Women, who study herbs and flowers for their healing powers and potions.

The lake is off limits for the locals because children and villagers have disappeared into it, including Merilee’s sister, Laura. The feverish girl was snatched by the witch, but Beatrice blames Leo’s father, and forbids Leo and Merilee from seeing each other, but that does not stop the playmates from meeting, or venturing near the dark lake.

Leo senses the witch’s power presence “deep inside him, behind his eyes, where the blood ran. He could feel her moan stroking his bones, creeping in under his flesh. She made him ache.” The lake and its witch also hold dark family secrets, which Leo and Merilee begin to uncover before one final nightmarish and slightly confusing final confrontation between Leo and the witch

The author, a resident of Australia and former editor of School Magazine, has written award-winning picture books, short stories, teen and young adult fiction. If this story has a dream-like quality, perhaps it is because Fienberg gets creative ideas from her own dreams. Although some of the characters’ names-Laura and Merilee-seem more modern than vintage Italian, still the story nicely develops a conflict of the period, between emerging sciences and traditional remedies and belief in the supernatural.

This is a magical, lyrical adventure for upper elementary and middle school students, who enjoy Harry Potter-type adventures and hunger for more fantasy.