



## The Wretched of Muirwood

**Jeff Wheeler**

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Fantasy series have become a dime a dozen in the past two decades, so it takes a large measure of talent and vision to start one that breathes new life into the genre. George R. R. Martin has done so with his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. Now, author Jeff Wheeler, an IT industry professional and the former editor of the e-zine *Deep Magic*, appears poised to do so with his Muirwood trilogy.

*The Wretched of Muirwood*, the first in the series, introduces a fresh approach to the coming-of-age tale with its star character, Lia. She is a “wretched,” a child deliberately orphaned at an abbey, which is led by an Aldermaston in the kingdom where Lia lives. Wretcheds have no families who will claim them; they are abandoned and must work to earn the money to depart the abbey in which they’re raised. They are segregated from the abbey’s students, called “learners,” who are taught to read and write.

Reading and writing are highly prized in Lia’s world. Books are made of precious metals, and only the chosen few are accepted as learners, who are served by helpers. Lia, being a wretched and a helper, has no access to education. Helpers and learners were segregated long ago, after a wretched was allowed to become a learner and used an abbey’s documents to find and murder his father, who was also a wretched. Learning one’s family history is a wretched’s Holy Grail, and Lia will do nearly anything to gain access to Muirwood Abbey’s historical records.

Lia has known nothing else but Muirwood Abbey. Her determination to learn her way out of being a wretched seems to begin on a stormy night when two men, one of them wounded, seek shelter at Muirwood. Lia’s decision to let them in and tend to the wounded man starts a chain of events that puts her on the road to her destiny, which she discovers as she journeys away from Muirwood.

Wheeler works with several themes in the book: the importance of family and belonging, trust and betrayal, the machinations of power, the surety of faith, the masks evil wears, how nothing in life is cut and dried, and coming of age amid danger and uncertainty. Each character is pivotal to the story’s progress.

Wheeler stokes his tale with many of the stock elements of fantasy, but, in his hands, none are clichés, from the presence of the Medium as a supernatural power to the abbey system that educates the learners. Wheeler writes with strength and confidence in the world he’s created and the characters who inhabit it.

It’s obvious that Wheeler has grasped the essentials of storytelling and woven them into his vision of Muirwood. Fantasy readers looking for a world that both entertains and engages are urged to read this series. *The Wretched of Muirwood* is a finely crafted beginning to what promises to be an epic fantasy.

J. G. STINSON (April 27, 2011)

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