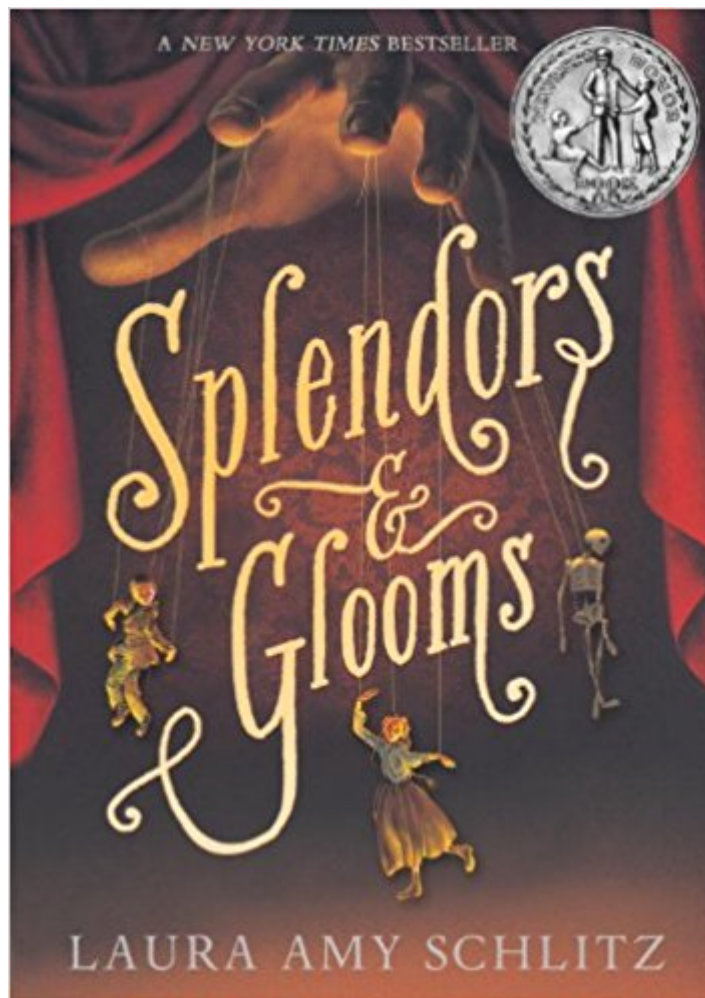


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Splendors And Glooms



Synopsis

WINNER OF A 2013 NEWBERY HONOR! Newbery Medalist Laura Amy Schlitz brings her sorcery to a Victorian gothic thriller — an enthralling, darkly comic tale that would do Dickens proud. The master puppeteer, Gaspare Grisini, is so expert at manipulating his stringed puppets that they appear alive. Clara Wintermute, the only child of a wealthy doctor, is spellbound by Grisini's act and invites him to entertain at her birthday party. Seeing his chance to make a fortune, Grisini accepts and makes a splendidly gaudy entrance with caravan, puppets, and his two orphaned assistants. Lizzie Rose and Parsefall are dazzled by the Wintermute home. Clara seems to have everything they lack — adoring parents, warmth, and plenty to eat. In fact, Clara's life is shadowed by grief, guilt, and secrets. When Clara vanishes that night, suspicion of kidnapping falls upon the puppeteer and, by association, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall. As they seek to puzzle out Clara's whereabouts, Lizzie and Parse uncover Grisini's criminal past and wake up to his evil intentions. Fleeing London, they find themselves caught in a trap set by Grisini's ancient rival, a witch with a deadly inheritance to shed before it's too late. Newbery Medal winner Laura Amy Schlitz's Victorian gothic is a rich banquet of dark comedy, scorching magic, and the brilliant and bewitching storytelling that is her trademark.

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Customer Reviews

Gr 4-8-Victorian London could be a magical place: horse-drawn carriages, puppet shows, elaborate upper-class houses. Of course it could also be miserable: fog, filthy streets, shabby hovels where too many people live in too few rooms. Schlitz conjures both the magic and the mundane here. For Clara's 12th birthday, her parents hire a street performer to give a puppet show in their home. The puppeteer, Grisini, is so talented that he appears to be magical. His two orphaned assistants, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall, are envious of Clara's home and all its comforts. Clara vanishes the night of the puppet show, and Grisini and his assistants are the prime suspects. Then Grisini disappears, and Lizzie Rose and Parsefall must seek out the missing girl, with the sinister and mysterious help of a wealthy old witch. Schlitz uses such evocative language that readers will practically smell dirty London and then be relieved by the crisp, cold air in the countryside around the witch's crumbling mansion. The characters are recognizable tropes: the witch is rotting from the inside out; the orphans may be dirty and ill-bred, but they have spirit and pluck; the little rich girl is actually sad and lonely; the skinny puppeteer and the overly dramatic landlady are recognizably Dickensian. Yet, they are so well drawn that they are never caricatures, but people whom readers will cheer for, be terrified of, or grow to like. The plot is rich with supernatural and incredibly suspenseful elements. Fans of mystery, magic, and historical fiction will all relish this novel.-Geri Diorio, Ridgefield Library, CT

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Newbery Medalist Schlitz delivers many pleasures

- fully dimensional children, period details so ripe one can nearly smell them, and droll humor that leavens a few scenes of true horror. A highly original tale about children caught in a harrowing world of magic and misdeeds.
- Publishers Weekly (starred review) A brooding Dickensian novel with a touch of fantasy and a glimmer of hope. . . Vividly portrayed and complex, the characters are well defined individuals whose separate strands of story are colorful and compelling. Schlitz weaves them into an intricate tapestry that is as mysterious and timeless as a fairy tale.
- Booklist (starred review) Two orphans, a witch and a girl who laughs at death: Each shares the lens of protagonist in Newbery-winner Schlitz's fully satisfying gothic novel...Schlitz's prose is perfect in every stitch, and readers will savor each word.
- Kirkus Reviews (starred review) Victorian London could be a magical place: horse-drawn carriages, puppet shows, elaborate upper-class

houses. Of course it could also be miserable: fog, filthy streets, shabby hovels where too many people live in too few rooms. Schlitz conjures both the magic and the mundane here. . . . Schlitz uses such evocative language that readers will practically smell dirty London and then be relieved by the crisp, cold air in the countryside around the witch's crumbling mansion. The characters are recognizable tropes: the witch is rotting from the inside out; the orphans may be dirty and ill-bred, but they have spirit and pluck; the little rich girl is actually sad and lonely; the skinny puppeteer and the overly dramatic landlady are recognizably Dickensian. Yet, they are so well drawn that they are never caricatures, but people whom readers will cheer for, be terrified of, or grow to like. The plot is rich with supernatural and incredibly suspenseful elements. Fans of mystery, magic, and historical fiction will all relish this novel.

•School Library Journal (starred review) Few books can be called both delightful and eerie - this novel is one. Utterly transporting.

•Rebecca Stead, Newbery Medal Winner Settle down; prepare for mesmerism: Laura Amy Schlitz is behind the curtain, ready to show us a story that has real magic lacing through it.

•Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked* and *What the Dickens: The Story of a Rogue Tooth Fairy* Thrilling and masterful. The characters are real humans, trapped upon the page as if by magic. The plotting is relentless . . . and then resolves into a perfect crystal. The book is beautiful. You will bark with laughter and you will cry. I did.

•Adam Gidwitz, author of *A Tale Dark and Grimm* A wonderfully twisty, creepy melodrama with three heroes to love, two villains to hate, and then at the end

•but I won't tell, except to say it's totally satisfying.

•Nancy Werlin, National Book Award finalist and Edgar Award winner The book builds slowly and ends stunningly.

•Chicago Tribune [A] superb gothic novel

•Vivid and strange, this latest work by Ms. Schlitz

•a Newbery Medal-winner

•is, like a marionette show that the orphans see one night, a spectacle "sharp-edged, exquisite, and eerily alive."

•Wall Street Journal This thrilling Dickensian novel weaves a tale of sorcery and magic that will mesmerize with its intricate plot and wicked but endearing characters.

•Instructor As the author unravels the mystery, she explores the many levels on which the characters themselves serve as puppets. Schlitz proves herself a master storyteller as she skillfully maneuvers the strings of this gothic tale right up to the astonishing climax.

•Shelf Awareness for Readers Middle-schoolers not quite ready for Erin Morgenstern's

•s The Night Circus can revel in this lusciously atmospheric title of rival magicians and the children caught in their crossfire.

•Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (starred review) Besides the rich language, setting and plot, *SPLENDORS AND GLOOMS* features an utterly delicious story that weaves its spell through the fortunes of innocent and not-so-innocent children, the cadaverous puppet master, a dying witch eager for revenge and

dramatic action in a castle tower that will have readers as entranced as Grisini's audiences. BookPagnet is exceedingly rare to find an author who hits it out of the park, so to speak, every single time she writes. Ms. Schlitz has written six published works for children and not one has been anything but remarkable. As adept at fairy stories as fairytales, at straight biographies or melodramatic ghost stories, at long last we see what she can do with a Dickensian setting. Result: She does wonders. Wonders and splendors with just a hint of gloom. The sole downside is sitting and waiting for her next book. If it's half as good as this one, it'll be worth the wait. Fuse #8 Production (SLJ blog)

In *Splendors and Glooms*, Laura Amy Schlitz serves up a true Dickensian romp complete with tenements shrouded in London fog and oppressed orphans. Young protagonists Lizzie Rose and Parsefall must use their wits and all the wiles they can muster to save themselves from their dastardly guardian, the consummate puppet master and conniving magician, Gaspare Grissini. The novel begins with Clara Wintermute anticipating her birthday party. She is turning twelve, and after an interminable season of mourning (seven long years) for her sister and three brothers who died of cholera, she has convinced her parents to hire a puppet theater she happened to see in Hyde Park to entertain her guests. She will even be allowed to invite the two children, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall, apprentices indentured to the puppet master, for a private tea before the party begins. Clara enjoys the festivities, laughing so hysterically at the puppet show that she disgraces herself and is sent to bed without supper. When morning comes, Clara is nowhere to be found, the victim of an apparent kidnapping. Her father, Dr. Wintermute, and the authorities suspect Grissini who promptly disappears. Left on their own, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall begin to tease out Grissini's evil past as their situation becomes increasingly desperate. At the lowest possible moment, when they have reason to believe that they too might be pursued by the police, Lizzie Rose finds a letter from an old acquaintance of Grissini's that seems to offer them sanctuary and a possible inheritance. They escape from London only to find themselves marooned at Strachan's Ghyll, a remote and desolate country estate, and straight into the clutches of a cursed and dying witch who has sinister motives of her own. *Splendors and Glooms* is a true Victorian gothic. Schlitz's characters are complex, consistent and prove to be capable of growth and change. Her prose is fluid and rich with description making it a pleasure to share aloud. Suitable for precocious children ages 9 though 12 but adults will enjoy this one too.

There's some very good reviews for this book already and I feel they have touched on some of the major points in this book. As period literature it is brilliant - and I believe it presents a very well developed glimpse into the time period (and it is a glimpse - the story is not sacrificed to be historically educational), but unlike other period literature you do have the element of magic. This is not magic like other children's books that come to mind. This is *not* like Harry Potter - no eyes of newt, no wand waving or broom flying; this is magic that, if it did exist, perhaps it would really be like this without the frills and flourish -- more like in Ursula K LeGuin's Earthsea Trilogy (the first volume of which I was given in 7th grade to read for English class)... something that seems more natural despite the fact that it's a supernatural element. (I might mention that a lot of my friends and co-workers think we need to stay away from magic because they feel it will cloud their children's sense of truth and religion -- but I was raised on fairy tales and while I imagined them real I still always knew the difference, and I see that with the children I work with as well.) For me, choosing books for children generally requires that the writing be worthy of emulation. I sometimes make exceptions for the content (I don't want my children writing like Gary Paulsen but I think that the books we have used of his make up for that in content and the discussions we were able to have around it). So, on that criteria, I need only say it's beautifully written. The next issue is age appropriateness. This is such a gray area, especially in our society and with the things children are exposed to all the time. One of the reviewers was not sure who she could recommend the book to because of the man accosting Lizzie Rose and trying to kiss her and with the drunkenness. I find this very real to the world children still grow up in. Children are sometimes inappropriately accosted and we make much of their right to say no, and in this book Lizzie Rose, who is trying to say no but lacks the physical strength, is saved by the fact that an adult finds out (walks in on) and intervenes and he is very angry about it. I think it is good for children to realize they can't always handle things themselves and, when they can't, there are safe adults who will stand by them. I think the message that some people mix poorly with alcohol and become unsafe is a reasonable one. (The children's classic "Heidi," when translated into English, left out a scene in which Clara's father and the butler, while up waiting for the "ghost," have too much to drink. In that case it was a sillier scene but the point is that our view on being scared to present the fact that people do drink and sometimes have too much and that that has consequences is a cultural one -- and perhaps we do ourselves a disservice.) There is real evil in this book, and I won't try and tell you otherwise, but there are also very good people who will make all the difference. In terms of appropriateness, I find more problems with "middle school" children's books where boys are imagining girls naked or imagining being able to touch her breasts or where a boy and a girl are swimming in their underwear and we are

introducing all of the feelings of one or both despite the fact that not all children are there yet and don't need to be rushed into that sort of sexual imagination. (Again, this is something children are bombarded with everywhere but I live and work within a circle where the parents try to stay away from modern media with their children and allow them time to be children before they are worried about whether or not they are "going out" with someone.) There is nothing erotic or enticing about Lizzie Rose being accosted (the man is trying to kiss her - so it's blatant without being too detailed for the age group; compared to "Memory Boy" - a book about life following a natural disaster - where a man who has taken possession of the family's summer house is trying to rub the leg of the same age group girl under the dining table, and later the men who follow the family from the town who the brother overhears saying " She's old ENOUGH!" where the children were naturally wanting to ask more questions about where this was all leading -- in this book, the kiss is portrayed as disgusting and the children found it sufficient explanation of what was going on and didn't need to discuss where it was leading even if the more worldly of them probably knew), and while the argument can be made it's not age appropriate, I think most children are well aware that there is good and bad in the world, and while I'd like to shield them from all the darkness I don't think I can. Even in my circles, children have been taught that there is good touch and bad touch and that sometimes there are people who try to violate that space. What I can do is encourage them that goodness can win, that right can triumph, while admitting that it isn't always easy. I can encourage them to know that, just like Lizzie Rose, a bad thing happening to you does not have to define who you are. I can also tell them that just because you occasionally have thoughts that feel selfish, especially when you are worried or afraid, it doesn't make you a bad person - that isn't what defines someone as evil. This is backed up by the book: Lizzie Rose worries that wanting the legacy from the rich old lady and worries about if a will gets written before she dies instead of worrying about her dying makes her bad. Yet when the witch uses her stone to look within Lizzie Rose she pronounces her good, and we see that truth repeated in Lizzie Rose's actions. I confess there were a few scenes where I wondered if the dark moments of the book would lead to nightmares for some of the children (the fact that Clara is somehow turned into a puppet and kidnapped), but all I have heard so far has been positive - the children identifying with the children standing strong against the odds. I was worried that the boy being, when needed, a thief might be glorifying his skill, but all the discussion I have heard from the children has been sympathetic to him, while still stating that it is wrong. I have heard some wonder aloud what they would do as an orphaned child in that time period or a place in the world where there was less available to help a child in trouble or alone. To me, the discussions and the thinking I see from the children have been what made this book a success.

Though this book is very thick, I think that it is full of surprises throughout the whole book. With every bit of magic that occurs comes with a great reaction that everyone will get. I strongly encourage readers to read this book for many reasons. I think that this book is a book with a high reading level. There are many parts that I like the most along with a great conclusion to this book.

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