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Deeplight

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Frances Hardinge has the weirdest, most fecund and generally extraordinary imagination of any contemporary children's writer. Far from ever running out of inspiration she gives the impression of having to constantly rein in her powers lest they take off in too many divergent directions. This current novel is set in an extended cluster of islands co-existing uneasily with the remnants of sunken gods now at the bottom of the surrounding sea. Once powerful, these over time had turned into monsters who then destroyed each other. But bits still survive, capable of transferring various powers to anyone able to haul them up from the deep.

The islands are now run by authoritarian governors ruling over a hierarchical society. Those at the bottom live in poverty and are sold as indentured labourers should they ever transgress. Mild-mannered 14-year-old Hank and his bullying friend Jelt are two such transgressors. After a robbery planned by Jelt goes wrong Hank is caught and faces three years in the galleys. He is saved by Dr Vyne, a grim researcher into the gods who puts Hank's plausibility to good use when it comes to interviewing elderly and infirm priests who still remember the old days. But Jelt makes a return and Hank once again has to decide whether his own survival or what he thought was a friendship comes first.

Their troubled relationship is the key to what happens next, and Hardinge describes it vividly and with sensitive psychological understanding. Their island and its fantastic history meanwhile provide plenty of on-going excitement, given that nothing can ever be taken for granted. An exciting and near-fatal chase rounds up a memorable display of imaginative fireworks at their most spectacular. Is the mixture a little too rich on occasions? It is certainly a relief when Hank can spend a whole day without something unearthly coming his way. But with such a powerful imagination at work it is pointless to cavil over details. Read it and be swept away.

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