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The Secret Horses Of Briar Hill



Synopsis

"Magical, terrifying, and full of heart. Open these pages, and ride true."-Kathi Appelt, Newbery Honor-winning author of *The True Blue Scouts of Sugar Man Swamp*"A remarkable book. Astonishing!"-Michael Morpurgo, author of *War Horse* There are winged horses that live in the mirrors of Briar Hill hospital. In the mirrors that line its grand hallways, which once belonged to a princess. In those that reflect the elegant rooms, now filled with sick children. It is her secret. One morning, when Emmaline climbs over the wall of the hospital's abandoned gardens, she discovers something incredible: a white horse with broken wings has left the mirror-world and entered her own. Tucked into the garden's once-gleaming sundial, Emmaline finds a letter from the Horse Lord. He is hiding the wounded white horse, named Foxfire, from a dark and sinister force—a Black Horse who hunts by colorless moonlight. If Emmaline is to keep the Black Horse from finding her new friend, she must collect colorful objects with which to blind him. But where can Emmaline find color when her world is filled with gray? Emmaline's narration is unreliable, flawlessly childlike, and deeply honest; her faith in magic brings her solace and, possibly, healing. The magical realism is reminiscent of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Elizabeth Goudge, or a child's version of *Life of Pi*...Readers will love this to pieces. Kirkus Reviews, Starred review"Endearing characters, metaphors for life and death, and a slow revelation of the horrors of war give this slim novel a surprising amount of heft." Booklist, Starred review

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 5 and up

Customer Reviews

Magic happens on the final pages of *The Secret Horses of Briar Hill*. Illusions become reality and another child shares a young girl's vision. Megan Shepherd has written a touching, lovely story in which the specters of both World War II and of tuberculosis overshadow the characters' childhood and have an impact on their life. Emmaline has a secret – she sees beautiful, winged horses peering out at her from mirrored surfaces. No one else at Briar Hill hospital – a sanitarium for children who have the "stillwaters", that is tuberculosis - knows about the horses. A group of nuns runs the hospital that Dr. Turner, widowed because of wartime bombing and suffering from PTSD, visits weekly. Along with the one-armed groundskeeper Thomas, Dr. Turner is the only man with whom the children have contact. Dr. Thomas examines the children, issuing different colored tickets that categorizes the severity of infection and predicts the prognosis for recovery or death. Emmaline's best friend, Anna, has a red ticket indicating she is unlikely to recover. One day when she climbs into a padlocked garden area, Emmaline discovers an injured winged horse. After a violent, stormy night, she finds a long, black feather. Later, Emmaline finds a letter from the "Horse Lord" warning of a "Black Horse who hunts by smell and moonlight". He asks Emmaline to care for Foxfire, the injured winged horse, until he returns. She accepts this responsibility. The balance of *The Secret Horses of Briar Hill* develops from this request and the situations Emmaline encounters as she attempts to fulfill the Horse Lord's bidding. As Emmaline tells her own story, the impact of both war and illness become evident. Benny, another patient at Briar Hill rejects what he believes is Emmaline's fantasy.

After the first few chapters, I thought that this would surely be a disappointing book. Among the books I've read this year to my daughter -- *The Nine Lives of Jacob Tibbs*, *Magicians Elephant* by DiCamillo, Kate [Hardcover], *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, *The Wild Robot*, and a few other books -- I could not even compare it as it was simply too fantastical but in a nonsensical manner and without the charm. It didn't seem fitting for a 5 year old let alone a 7 year old or a 10 year old. It has a similarity to *The Magician's Elephant* in that it is set in a cold, bleak world where our characters seem to survive -- just barely -- on hope. Yet it in the first two thirds of the book, it seemed to lack the charm and wit of *The Magician's Elephant*. But the ending, oh the ending! It makes this book very much worth the read! We are introduced to Emmaline May who we learn is

sick with the "stillwaters" (tuberculosis) and is a resident in an old princess' manor that has been converted to a hospital in the midst of the second World War.

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