



[Home](#) > Dragonkeeper: Garden of the Purple Dragon

Dragonkeeper: Garden of the Purple Dragon

Books Reviewed:

[Dragonkeeper: Garden of the Purple Dragon](#) [1]

Issue:

[165](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Robert Dunbar](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Readers who enjoyed Wilkinson's earlier novel, **Dragonkeeper**, will no doubt be happy to return to the familiar setting, characters and themes of her sequel. Once again, we are taken back to the Han Dynasty of ancient China, a landscape and time picturesquely evoked in a prose which often shimmers in its delicacy of description. Within this delicacy, however, there is a fair amount of murky machination as Ping, 'a girl of ten-and-two years' comes to contend with the increasingly demanding responsibilities that her role as dragonkeeper would seem to involve. Her relationships with Kai, the dragon in question, and with Hua, her ever-resourceful rat, are depicted with an entertaining humour, an attractive counterpoint to the various levels of villainy she encounters, even within the hallowed grounds of her Emperor, Liu Che, a mere 'ten-and-five years old'. At least two deeper matters underlie this quite engaging narrative. On a psychological level, we follow Ping's search for self and family and witness the touching conflict between her aspirations for Kai and her sense of her parental obligations. On a philosophical note, we are made to ponder on the young Emperor's obsessions with longevity and immortality and the extent to which these can disrupt 'the harmony of the universe'. These strands coalesce convincingly in a novel which, in spite of occasional sluggish moments, has considerable power and presence.

Running Order:

49

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/dragonkeeper-garden-of-the-purple-dragon>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/165>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/robert-dunbar>