



The Master of the Fallen Chairs

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off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Thirteen chairs in a painting. Eleven lie toppled on the ground. Clues within the picture suggest that each fallen chair reflects the violent death of a member of the Drago family, owners of The House of Skirl where, in a dusty gallery, the painting hangs. Kim, the young narrator of the story, and his mysterious kinsman newly arrived from the Pacific Islands, Igthy Ma-tuu Clava (Iggy to Kim), come to see that those two standing chairs represent the two of them, the latest in the Drago line. And that someone is murderously determined that all thirteen chairs must fall.

You can trust very little in the House of Skirl. Nothing remains constant, including the painting. Rooms shift about, in time as well as location; corridors lead to one place today, another tomorrow or yesterday. Messages are drawn in the dust by invisible fingers, whispering spirits are maybe loyal friends, maybe deadly enemies. A servant girl (or is she?) disappears and is found headfirst down a well. A stranger lurks in the grounds. Somewhere among the shadows and secrets lies salvation for Kim and Iggy. It's often not clear which century we are in, who is currently alive or dead or as yet unborn. Kim cannot be sure whether he is awake or dreaming and the enemy who hunts him takes different forms in different times. For Miss Alba Hockmuth is a formidable opponent ? literary cousin to Mrs Coulter or Mrs Pouncer. Every now and again, though, Kim finds a friend ? most memorably a wonderfully garrulous and vain great auk, who turns out to be not so much extinct as nailed painfully down on a board, itching to be set free.

Henry Porter has written adult thrillers and his first novel for young readers moves with assurance between adventure and suspense, the mysterious and the magical; crucially he has the engaging knack of leavening menace with humour. The novel is set in 1962 and while it moves between many times, it never belongs to our own day. There is a feel almost of Masefield and **The Midnight Folk** about it, with the lonely young boy in the old house, his evil tutor, nothing being what it seems and the immanence of danger and magic. As with Masefield, the sense of otherness stems from the language, a pleasure in itself. Mr Porter manages his slippery plot with more discipline and less whimsy than Masefield, however ? which is just as well, since readers cannot afford to blink. More adventures are promised in the House of Skirl; in fact, the closing pages enticingly point to the next book, since Kim, Iggy and the great auk are left ?betwixt and between times, waiting to know our fate?.

Running Order:

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