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Just Henry

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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The sheer length of this novel, its cast of adults and young teenagers, and its themes of illegitimacy, divorce, pregnancy, and family conflict, could all suggest that **Just Henry** should be classed as a 'young adult' novel, but in fact it will appeal equally or even more to younger readers over the age of ten. Once past the barrier of its size, they will be drawn into a fast and readable story which expertly tweaks the nerves of sympathy, indignation and suspense.

Michelle Magorian's books are usually set in World War Two and the early post-war years, and are thoroughly researched for authentic period detail. This one, set in 1950, is no exception. Readers accustomed to the modern world of high divorce rates and unmarried parenthood will be taken aback by the strict and punitive social attitudes current in their grandparents' childhood, and Magorian does indeed exaggerate them for the purposes of her story, but her picture of 1950 is essentially accurate, and the plot depends on it.

Henry, coming up 15 and in his last year at school, lives with his mother and his stepfather, whom he detests, believing himself the son of a dead war hero. As the turbulent events unfold, Henry's family loyalties and affections are violently overturned. At school there are two classmates whom, in line with general prejudice, he shuns and despises. One is supposedly the son of a wartime army deserter, the other illegitimate, both ostracized in a world where the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Linked to Henry's family upheaval is the parallel story of another revolution in Henry's life, turning these two outcasts into his closest friends.

There is some unconvincing melodrama in the tale that lies behind these changes, involving the calamitous reappearance of Henry's biological father - neither dead nor a hero - and the emergence of a 'fairy godmother' figure, one Mrs Beaumont, whose house expands like Doctor Who's Tardis to shelter three homeless families. But the meat of the story lies in the developing friendships between the children themselves, and in Henry's personal struggle with emotional trials and physical dangers, not to mention his and everyone else's true-to-life addiction to the cinema. The result is a galloping yarn which is consistently entertaining, and vividly evokes a vanished world.

Running Order:

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Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/just-henry>

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