



The Ogre of Oglefort

Books Reviewed:

[The Ogre of Oglefort](#) [1]

Issue:

[185](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Caroline Heaton](#) [3]

~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

From the witty jacket illustration by Jimmy Pickering to the end page, this book is a sheer delight. With nearing 20 books for children to her name, Eva Ibbotson retains all her original exuberance and **The Ogre of Oglefort** sings with inventiveness.

The secret of Ibbotson's appeal lies in her authority as a storyteller. She summons her cast of flawed and disgruntled witches, wizards, hags and ghosts and tumbles them on to the page where they inhabit this-world and fairytale settings with equal ease. And indeed, the two intersect amusingly and convincingly, so that (from the writer who pioneered the notion of a 'magical platform' long before **Harry Potter**) we have an ancient London Underground network populated by unpleasant ghosts and a Boarding House run by a Hag exiled from her beloved marshy Dribble by human developers. Here she hosts other misfit Unusual People like herself. These include Ulf Oakroot, an exiled troll; Gertie the enchantress; and a motley assortment of henkies, 'those faeries who limp and have hollow backs'. Mrs Brainsweller, scourge of her gentle son, Dr Brian Brainsweller (a brilliant wizard, but entirely lacking in 'any degrees in Everyday Life?'), drops by for sugar and a gossip.

The residents survive by taking menial jobs in an uninterested human world, but look forward to the Summer Task, allotted at the annual Meeting for Unusual Creatures, for a bit of magical relief.

Normally the task is something quite pleasant, but this year the conference is disrupted by an alarming visitation from the three Norns, ancient Fates-like beings who lay a gloomy task on the Hag and her friends. They must rescue the Princess Mirella from the truly dreadful, flesh-eating Ogre of Oglefort. The Hag's familiar, a toad called Gladys, is proving recalcitrant so the Hag enlists the help of Ivo, an orphaned boy she has befriended. The journey to the Ogre's castle in the far north of Ostland 'burdened with the dubious 'helpful' gifts the Norns have provided' is difficult, but this is nothing to the challenges that await the friends inside. These include a Princess fleeing from an unwelcome marriage and who decidedly does not want to be rescued, and an Ogre who doesn't like human flesh and only wants to be freed from constant human demands that he exercise his other ogrely talent of changing people into animals. The Ogre declares himself on the edge of a breakdown, while Princess Mirella shuts herself in her room refusing to eat until the Ogre agrees to turn her into one of her beloved white birds. Then there is the not-so-small matter of the Ogre's personal hygiene and the unsavoury state of his Castle with the left-over Grumblers in the basement. The latter are an

unpleasant married pair insisting on being changed to escape one another, while the Castle grounds are full of more peaceful exotic creatures, previously changed from humans by the Ogre.

How the Hag and her friends fulfil the Norns' task, as they see fit, and the Ogre, Ivo and Mirella find their own special brand of happiness involves a number of variously funny and touching episodes. Child readers will revel in a robust vein of grotesquerie, while any adult reading aloud to a younger child is in for a treat: a keen and affectionate eye for human foibles is only matched by Eva Ibbotson's marvellous use of language. An unobtrusive environmentalism suggests that the cure for many ills may lie in an engagement with nature and a respect for the individuality of others.

Perhaps, in the end, Ibbotson hints, we are all somewhat 'Unusual Creatures'. Delightful line drawings by Teresa Murfin complement the text.

Running Order:

57

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-ogre-of-oglefort>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/185>

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