



Ministry of Pandemonium

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Editor's Choice:

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Media type:

Book

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12-year-old Ben Harvester has just moved to a new home and a new school. In Highgate Cemetery he encounters an old man named Mr Dudley October who commiserates with him on the death of his aunt Carrie. But Aunt Carrie has been out of touch for years and no one knew she had died. In school Ben has a vision of two children who have died in a fire. They are desperate for his help.

Mr October, it transpires, is a member of an organisation called the Ministry of Pandemonium, which escorts the souls of the departed to a better world. They compete with the Lords of Sundown, headed by Mr Cadaver, who want to send the dear departed to a darker fate. Ben has special gifts that make him a desirable recruit for the Ministry. Westwood's book draws on the ancient Greek myth of the psychopompos, the spirit that leads the souls of the dead into the other world.

Ben is now irresistibly drawn into a war between the forces of good and evil ? and a very violent war it is too. When the crux of the battle comes, Ben acts on his own initiative in a way that violates the code of the Ministry, a risky move that has enormous consequences for Ben and for many others.

It would be easy to mistake this book for a simple blood and thunder story. It has some features that would fit well in a horror comic, such as flesh-eating monsters known as Mawbreeds. However, the book has a deeper and darker side. It explores quite profoundly issues of life and death and the significance of ?the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns?. Quite alarmingly, it turns out that being virtuous is no guarantee of a pleasant afterlife. By sheer chance, you can end up in the mire. Equally, wicked people can get lucky.

The underlying theme of this unconventional and courageous book is the randomness of human existence and fate. We are creatures at the mercy of chance. Parents who want to bring up their children to believe that good and evil are rewarded and punished on some basis of justice might think carefully before they buy Westwood's book.

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