



# The Fire Chronicle

Books Reviewed:

[The Fire Chronicle](#) [1]

Issue:

[198](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

For once, a fantasy trilogy that avoids pastiche or plagiarism: no echoes of Tolkien (Mighty Names to suggest authenticity), no races against Time (one-damn-fight-after-another), no easy escapes from inescapable danger (...then she remembered - The Amulet!). An intriguing structure sustains the many elements of this second novel in 'The Books of the Beginning?' trilogy by American John Stephens.

The three Books of the Beginning must be brought together and it is prophesied that three children will do so, despite ferocious opposition. The story of Kate, the oldest Wibberly, began in **The Emerald Atlas**, and her narrative continues as one strand of this, the second in the **Books of the Beginning** trilogy. The main focus is now on her brother, almost-thirteen-year-old Michael - bespectacled, unheroic, self-conscious - and his search for The Fire Chronicle. His sister, Emma (only-just-thirteen, and that's very important to Michael) will continue the hunt in the final volume, for her adventure has already begun in this novel's closing pages.

The stakes are high; the future of a world in which magic and life-as-we-know-it co-exist, sometimes at enmity. As if that were not enough, the children are desperate to find and save their parents, who have also played a wizardly part in this tale. Their two quests often confront the children with conflicting, impossible choices. Saving the world may be commonplace enough in fantasy literature, but the treatment of the task here is highly original. There is a fusion of rapid adventure, energetic melodrama, witty dialogue, teenage angst and sensitivity. The narrative slips through time to settings ranging from The Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans to the 1890s streets and gangs of New York and then to a fertile volcanic valley in deepest Antarctica populated by elves, dwarves, an entranced dragon and a bad bunch of bad guys. Magic is not an easy way out; it's dangerous stuff and needs to be deployed responsibly. All this could so easily whirl out of control, but Stephens keeps his plot deftly in hand - or *plots*, for the adventures of Kate are interleaved with those of Michael and Emma, who might be in another century and on another continent at the time.

There *are* individual episodes and excitements, usually driven by extraordinary characters: a demoralised wizard hiding from himself and his past on an Italian hillside; the elvish Princess Wilamena who, once freed from the scaly body of a dragon, fancies her liberator Michael like crazy, much to his embarrassment. But these encounters are not digressions, they develop the plot. They also develop the main characters themselves, for the trilogy reflects growth through

adolescence far more convincingly than most YA novels. What perhaps adds conviction to adventure is ambiguity; you never know whom you can trust, including yourself; the boy Kate is falling in love with, to his own confusion, is destined to be her greatest enemy, the Dire Magnus. In such situations, knowing yourself and your limits is critical.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/198/childrens-books/reviews/the-fire-chronicle>

**Links:**

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-fire-chronicle-0>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/198>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>