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The Blackthorn Key



Synopsis

Following a series of murders, an apothecary's apprentice must solve puzzles and decipher codes in pursuit of a secret that could destroy the world in this "spectacular debut" (Kirkus Reviews, starred review). "Tell no one what I've given you." Until he got that cryptic warning, Christopher Rowe was happy, learning how to solve complex codes and puzzles and creating powerful medicines, potions, and weapons as an apprentice to Master Benedict Blackthorn "with maybe an explosion or two along the way. But when a mysterious cult begins to prey on London's apothecaries, the trail of murders grows closer and closer to Blackthorn's shop. With time running out, Christopher must use every skill he's learned to discover the key to a terrible secret with the power to tear the world apart. In his stunning debut novel, Kevin Sands brings readers on a heart-stopping adventure rich with suspense, mystery, and unforgettable characters.

Book Information

Series: Blackthorn Key (Book 1)

Paperback: 400 pages

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Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars See all reviews (37 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #16,512 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #16 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > Europe #164 in Books > Children's Books > Mysteries & Detectives #1071 in Books > Children's Books > Action & Adventure

Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Grade Level: 5 - 9

Customer Reviews

The Blackthorn Key is an engaging middle grade historical/mystery that reads very much like a 12-year-old-friendly version of an Umberto Eco book. Set during the English Restoration (17th century, when Charles II was restored to the throne after Oliver Cromwell's puritan revolution/civil war) the book has wonderful historical perspectives on the times that aren't overbearing or obtrusive

to the story. But at heart, this is a book about a boy's adventures in London trying to solve the mystery of his apothecary master's mysterious nightly excursions. Story: Christopher Rowe was saved from the orphanage when a apothecary guildmember noted his mixing skills. Apprenticed to Master Blackthorn, a gentle and kind person boss, Christopher is learning valuable skills that will elevate him above his humble beginnings. But when fellow apothecary guild members begin turning up dead, and with a rumor of a mysterious "cult of the Archangel" behind the killings, Christopher and friend Tom will have to use all their courage and mettle to survive. The Blackthorn Key makes great use of astronomy, botany and especially chemistry to solve puzzles that will lead to the source of the murders. Christopher is intent on saving his master, Blackthorn, from the deadly cult - one intent on discovering an alchemical reaction that could change the course of British (and perhaps the world) history. There are several surprises along the way and certainly Christopher and Tom have great adventures that middle graders will love. But this is also a book that adults can appreciate - from the historical details/milieu, a touch of supernatural mystery, to some great twists and turns. The characters are true to the era as well as their ages.

This book was pitched at middle grade so immediately one's point of reference is the Harry Potter series. Of course, comparing anything to that is somewhat unfair, but I have to say that this book was really good. The story is about Christopher who has been plucked from the orphanage to become apprentice to the apothecary, Benedict Blackthorn. It is the seventeenth century, Charles II had returned to the throne after the period of the Interregnum, but there are still puritans in London and splinter groups who seem to be pursuing their own, nefarious goals. When a number of apothecaries are brutally murdered, Christopher finds himself on the run with nothing but the riddles and codes left him by his master to try to determine who is behind the killings and put a stop to it. Christopher is a delightful main character. Unlike so many teenage protagonists in books nowadays, he's thoughtful, caring, loyal and intelligent. I warmed to him immediately. For the age level this book is pitched at, I thought he was perfect. He still had a sense of mischief and got up to various tricks, which you would expect from a 14 year old boy, but overall his personality was delightful. His resourcefulness in terms of what he has learned during his apprenticeship is what carries him through and it makes for both interesting and fun reading. The author did a great job of painting a picture of historical London, albeit fictional. I particularly enjoyed the description of smells and sounds which differ so much from what we know today. I also liked the historical accuracy in terms of the ingredients used - in particular, the blithe handling of mercury was absolutely accurate.

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