



The Fifth Doll

Charlie N. Holmberg

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The bestselling author of *The Paper Magician Series* transports readers to a darkly whimsical world where strange magic threatens a quiet village that only a courageous woman can save.

Matrona lives in an isolated village, where her life is centered on pleasing her parents. She's diligent in her chores and has agreed to marry a man of their choosing. But a visit to Slava, the local tradesman, threatens to upend her entire life.

Entering his empty house, Matrona discovers a strange collection of painted nesting dolls—one for every villager. Fascinated, she can't resist the urge to open the doll with her father's face. But when her father begins acting strangely, she realizes Slava's dolls are much more than they seem.

When he learns what she's done, Slava seizes the opportunity to give Matrona stewardship over the dolls—whether she wants it or not. Forced to open one of her own dolls every three days, she falls deeper into the grim power of Slava's creations. But nothing can prepare her for the profound secret hiding inside the fifth doll.

The Fifth Doll Details

Date : Published July 25th 2017 by 47North

ISBN :

Author : Charlie N. Holmberg

Format : Kindle Edition 253 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Young Adult, Horror, Magic, Mystery

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From Reader Review The Fifth Doll for online ebook

R.Q. Woodward says

Loved this book. Easily the best book I've read all year (which is saying a lot since it's my 26th in 2017).

The writing style is beautiful and flawless. The world comes alive with graceful imagery. The characters are complex and dynamic. The structure/pacing of the novel is steady and building: either the mystery of the world, the magic of the dolls, the romantic 'complications' of the protagonist (sorry, no spoilers!), or the timeline itself keep the book fascinating and engrossing throughout. I couldn't put it down, but honestly, I didn't really try to. I let myself get swept away by the narrative, and I have a feeling I'm going to be thinking about this book for a long time yet to come.

I was given an advance copy of this book, and I promise, that is NOT why I'm rating it so highly. 100% truth: It's probably my new favorite book by Charlie N. Holmberg (and I really, really love The Paper Magician). I wasn't a huge fan of Magic Bitter, Magic Sweet, so don't think I'm just giving out free 5 Star ratings either. This is my second 5-star read in 2017, out of 26 books, and I wholeheartedly mean it.

I was BLOWN AWAY by how wonderfully this book is written and highlighted line after line of Holmberg's beautiful prose. Her descriptions are gorgeous: she describes emotions, physical reactions (hearts racing/skin tingling/etc), and scenery in new and unique ways throughout the book. I just realized my Kindle erased ALL of my notes and highlights (and am now crying), so here are only a few hasty examples of what I mean:

"Matrona imagined her flush was made of thousands of biting ants, and the soft breeze blew them off her skin as she walked, carrying them back into the wood."

"He was still as an oak trunk, silent as a candle."

"Matrona's heart retreated until it hit her spine, and she quivered with its every beat."

"The sky began to tint pink as the sun crawled toward its wooded bed."

"Her entire body became a heartbeat."

"Jaska straightened, though his whole person seemed to wilt."

Steven says

Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for providing me with a copy in exchange for an honest review.

Charlie Holmberg is a relatively new author. I've read her Paper Magician trilogy, and it was highly original and was quite entertaining. The magic systems that she comes up with are Sanderson-esque.

The Fifth Doll is no exception. It's got a really creative and almost scary twist on magic and Russian nesting dolls.

You can read the blurb for what it's about, but basically, the main character stumbles upon a secret that a fellow townsperson is keeping, and is forced to start messing with the magic of some Russian nesting dolls. Over time, more and more is revealed, and Holmberg has done a great job of peeling back the layers of humanity, one doll at a time, to reveal that fifth doll inside.

Overall, a unique and hard to put down take on Russian folklore, magic, and seeing past the outside shells of the people around us. I'd definitely recommend this to people who like interesting magic and folklore and slow-reveal stories.

Heather says

The Fifth Doll is another creative and excellent book by Charlie Holmberg. We move through the story in Matrona's point of view as she discovers some strange things going on in her small village. I enjoyed that the reader didn't know any answers until Matrona figured them out. I also loved the unique world building that was centered on a Russian subculture. The Fifth Doll is hard to put down once you start. A fun read!

Rae says

I loved this!!!

A dark and twisted fairy tale filled with sorcery and nesting dolls!

I feel like this was a very refreshing book, something new and different that I haven't read before.

Every twist and turn kept me guessing as to what could possibly happen next, and I wasn't let down! I really enjoyed the way the story unfolded and wasn't left confused or wondering what was going on.

There were times when I was screaming to not open another doll, and then there were times when I wanted nothing more than to just jump in the book and wrench open every doll on the shelves!!!

The magic wasn't overdone or cheesy. The little bit of romance was perfect and didn't take away from the rest of the story. I really enjoyed the characters and the setting, it felt like Holmberg really knew exactly the image she wanted to place in the mind of her readers.

It was quick paced and a good read, I closed the book feeling content with what I had read and would definitely recommend it to others!!

What is it about folklore and fairytales that always draws me in and refuses to let me go until the very last page?! This was such a dark and twisted tale filled with sorcery and nesting dolls. I have never read anything like it and I loved every minute of it! This was such a refreshing read, new and different with twists and turns that kept me guessing what could possibly happen next!? I enjoyed how the story unfolded layer at a time, like each layer of the nesting dolls that this tale was about. Folklore always seems to grab my heart on some deep level of story telling and I love when an author incorporates that into their story. It feels like this is how a story is meant to be told. With hidden meanings, and lessons learned the story as a whole takes on its own personal meaning as each person interprets it in their own way, and how special is that when reading a book?!

This story was about a girl named Matrona, who has lived her whole life in a small village and is a loyal and

faithful daughter to her parents and their dairy farm. She has always aimed to please them and that is all she needs to be happy. So when they arrange a marriage that will be good for the family, she is happy to oblige under the guise that this is how her life should be, and is meant to be. All until she is sent to visit the local tradesman, Slava. When she arrives at Slava's unique home, she is surprised to find it empty with the door ajar, so she enters in search of the other gentleman, hoping that nothing bad happened to him. She did not expect to find a room full of painted nesting dolls, all with the faces of her fellow villagers. Curious, she finds the one of her father and opens it up, unable to help herself. When she arrives back home later though, she starts to notice that her father isn't acting normal. Something is off and Matrona can't help but wonder if it has something to do with the strange dolls she found in Slava's house. Soon she is pulled into a fight to right her wrongs and accept a responsibility that she isn't sure she can handle. There is so much more to her little village than she ever knew possible, and she must break from her little perfect routine to save those she loves before its too late.

The world building in this was so unique and perfect with the theme of the nesting dolls. I could see all the little village homes and their bright colors, and fenced fields that contained the neighbors fields for their livestock or crops. Being a small and simple setting it was easy to imagine and follow as we go along with Matrona through her daily chores and the bigger adventure she is led on as the story progresses. There is a hint of magic with the dolls, but other than that magic does not take part in the rest of the story. I like this, because there isn't some crazy magic system to try and comprehend. We discover with Matrona, what magic the dolls hold and how it effects those who open them.

The romance in it starts out seeming like its going to be stiff and boring, but we quickly find out that even though Matrona will do what her parents wish of her and marry whom they want, she still has a heart that yearns for love, and love might not be with the man her parents chose. Jaska was a wonderful character and their friendship and forbidden feelings for each other kept the butterflies in my stomach churning throughout, hoping that they would somehow find a way to be together even though Matrona had never gone against her parents wishes, and Jaska was the son of the town crazy lady. But just as Matrona discovers that there's more to this village than meets the eye, Jaska soon learns that maybe his mother's ramblings are that crazy after all.

The adventure that ensues once things get going, kept me enthralled to the very end. I loved the dark sense of mystery that you discover things as the characters in the book do, leaving you to figure out what's happening with them. I was on the edge of my seat wishing my eyes to read faster just to find out what happens. I love how everything wraps up neatly in the end with just enough to let your imagination run its course, but with enough solidity to keep you from feeling like there were any loose ends. I have read a few of Holmberg's other books and really fell in love with the ease in which she writes and this book was no different. I can't wait to see what she writes next. But until then, you should definitely give *The Fifth Doll* a read, you won't regret it!

The Captain says

Ahoy there me mateys! I received this fantasy eARC from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. So here be me honest musings . . .

So as usual the cover drew me in. And the premise is quite fun. A girl accidentally finds a room in a neighbor's house that contains matryoshka (nesting) dolls. The catch is that there is one painted to look like

every villager. Why is there a doll painted with her face? This glimpse leads her to be drawn into the mystery of her neighbor Slava's world. He wants her to be the next caretaker of the dolls and their magic. The catch is that for every one of her dolls that she opens, serious consequences occur that expose her to the truth she doesn't know how to handle.

I liked the ideas in this book but unfortunately the writing does not do them justice. The main character, Matrona, is 26 but acts like a very immature twelve year old. She is more concerned with her worry over not being loved by her betrothed and going through with her arranged marriage than the problems of the village being controlled by Slava. At the same time, she has a crush on another neighbor from a less prosperous family and waffles about that too. Her naivete grew tiresome.

All of the characters seemed flat, Matrona included. I understand magic is involved but everyone seemed like inhuman cardboard cutouts. I would have liked full fleshed out people.

While the first two consequences of Matrona's dolls were especially interesting, the plot was confusing overall. There were periods of intense information dropping, especially in the beginning, and then other parts where nothing happened. There are entire sections with Matrona wandering around the village waffling over her love life. Her love interest falls in love with her in just a week. Part of the action was delayed because there were 3 day gaps between opening the next doll. The villain didn't really do anything other than intimidate Matrona and disappears for entire sections of the book so that Matrona can do something to further the plot.

Then Matrona has a vision in Chapter 16 / 73% in and the book had a sharp decline that lasted through the end. The explanations for the mystery of the dolls and Matrona's decisions and methods in fighting back were so lackluster. I was so close to the end at that point that I finished so I could see how the author chose to resolve the issues. Again interesting concepts but poor execution.

I seem to be in the minority so far with this opinion so take it with a grain of sea salt. If ye chose to read it, I hope ye like it far better than I. I just know I won't be readin' another book by this author.

So lastly . . .

Thank you 47North!

check out me other reviews at <https://thecaptainsquartersblog.wordpress.com>

Krysti says

The Fifth Doll reads like a classic fairytale, is wildly imaginative, and so much fun. This story is so unique and creative. I've never read anything like it before, and I absolutely devoured it.

The magic system in this story is so original and just so Charlie Holmberg. If you've read her other novels, you will totally understand what I mean when I say that Charlie's books, characters, and the magic systems within them are unlike anyone else's. Charlie has a truly individual writing style, and I always find her books so fun and refreshing. What I loved about this magic system was that it is very specific. It isn't a no-holds-bar type of system where magic swoops in to easily resolve the conflicts in the story. Matrona has to really fight to overcome the obstacles she faces.

And speaking of Matrona, she was an incredibly likable character, who was so easy to root for throughout the story. There is an inner-goodness and innocence about her, but there is definitely some fierceness to her too.

I absolutely loved the little village this book is set in. It's so charming on the surface but has layers of darkness and mystery underneath that were both captivating and sometimes a bit creepy. Perfect setting for this tale.

While Matrona's discovery of, and fight against, the dark magic looming over her little village is the main focus of this story, there is also a super sweet romance that I enjoyed so much.

The Fifth Doll is a really fun read that is sure to entertain readers of all ages.

Thanks so much to Amazon Publishing for granting me a review copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Mindy says

The Fifth Doll is another excellent book by Charlie N. Holmberg. This was an intriguing world that she created and I loved how the story enfolds. Matrona is such a great character. Her curiosity leads to trouble at first, but I loved her determination to not accept a certain fate. There were so many things that had me guessing and I had a hard time putting the book down. Charlie does a great job of revealing the awesome twists and turns that kept the story moving perfectly. There were very cool surprises I was not expecting. Very well done!

I received an ARC from the author. All views and opinions expressed are my own.

Rae says

What is it about folklore and fairytales that always draws me in and refuses to let me go until the very last page?! This was such a dark and twisted tale filled with sorcery and nesting dolls. I have never read anything like it and I loved every minute of it! This was such a refreshing read, new and different with twists and turns that kept me guessing what could possibly happen next!? I enjoyed how the story unfolded layer at a time, like each layer of the nesting dolls that this tale was about. Folklore always seems to grab my heart on some deep level of story telling and I love when an author incorporates that into their story. It feels like this is how a story is meant to be told. With hidden meanings, and lessons learned the story as a whole takes on its own personal meaning as each person interprets it in their own way, and how special is that when reading a book?!

This story was about a girl named Matrona, who has lived her whole life in a small village and is a loyal and faithful daughter to her parents and their dairy farm. She has always aimed to please them and that is all she needs to be happy. So when they arrange a marriage that will be good for the family, she is happy to oblige under the guise that this is how her life should be, and is meant to be. All until she is sent to visit the local tradesman, Slava. When she arrives at Slava's unique home, she is surprised to find it empty with the door ajar, so she enters in search of the other gentleman, hoping that nothing bad happened to him. She did not

expect to find a room full of painted nesting dolls, all with the faces of her fellow villagers. Curious, she finds the one of her father and opens it up, unable to help herself. When she arrives back home later though, she starts to notice that her father isn't acting normal. Something is off and Matrona can't help but wonder if it has something to do with the strange dolls she found in Slava's house. Soon she is pulled into a fight to right her wrongs and accept a responsibility that she isn't sure she can handle. There is so much more to her little village than she ever knew possible, and she must break from her little perfect routine to save those she loves before its too late.

The world building in this was so unique and perfect with the theme of the nesting dolls. I could see all the little village homes and their bright colors, and fenced fields that contained the neighbors fields for their livestock or crops. Being a small and simple setting it was easy to imagine and follow as we go along with Matrona through her daily chores and the bigger adventure she is led on as the story progresses. There is a hint of magic with the dolls, but other than that magic does not take part in the rest of the story. I like this, because there isn't some crazy magic system to try and comprehend. We discover with Matrona, what magic the dolls hold and how it effects those who open them.

The romance in it starts out seeming like its going to be stiff and boring, but we quickly find out that even though Matrona will do what her parents wish of her and marry whom they want, she still has a heart that yearns for love, and love might not be with the man her parents chose. Jaska was a wonderful character and their friendship and forbidden feelings for each other kept the butterflies in my stomach churning throughout, hoping that they would somehow find a way to be together even though Matrona had never gone against her parents wishes, and Jaska was the son of the town crazy lady. But just as Matrona discovers that there's more to this village than meets the eye, Jaska soon learns that maybe his mother's ramblings are that crazy after all.

The adventure that ensues once things get going, kept me enthralled to the very end. I loved the dark sense of mystery that you discover things as the characters in the book do, leaving you to figure out what's happening with them. I was on the edge of my seat wishing my eyes to read faster just to find out what happens. I love how everything wraps up neatly in the end with just enough to let your imagination run its course, but with enough solidity to keep you from feeling like there were any loose ends. I have read a few of Holmberg's other books and really fell in love with the ease in which she writes and this book was no different. I can't wait to see what she writes next. But until then, you should definitely give *The Fifth Doll* a read, you won't regret it!

Mel (Epic Reading) says

This is my first foray into the writing of Charlie N. Holmberg. *The Paper Magician* is patiently waiting on my overfilled TBR print bookshelf. After reading *The Fifth Doll* it is definitely moving closer to the top!

Fifth Doll is a solid read. Good characters, interesting unique plot, and a love interest/romance that was just enough for me. The magic in it is clever and yet felt very natural. I think often times when we can't put a finger on why we didn't like a magical system it's because it's illogical or unnatural. Holmberg certainly understands how most people think and keeps his magic inside a realm we can all easily understand and appreciate.

There is a constant tension and step-up of the plot in a way that keeps you turning pages. I was never once bored or annoyed with the general story. Certainly I cheered on the obvious romantic interest, as everyone

likely will, and am frustrated when I doesn't play out "perfectly". But this I also liked because it's more like real life. Pieces rarely fall into place in the way you expect them to.

Overall, The Fifth Doll is a solid read. You won't go wrong gifting it to a teen 13 or older (maybe even a bit younger if the child is an advanced reader). It's got some intense moments but they are not inappropriate at all. Just moments that are dark enough to keep a teen reading but nothing too offensive that parents would frown at.

Alternatively if you are like me and an adult that loves teen books I believe that you will at least be moderately pleased with this read. It's not the best book of the year but it's certainly worth a place on my shelf and I have no trouble recommending it.

To read this and more of my reviews visit my blog at [Epic Reading](#)

Please note: I received an eARC of this book from the publisher via NetGalley. This is an honest and unbiased review.

samantha (books-are-my-life20) says

I really enjoyed this book, the plot was different and imaginative. It kept me wanting more, The characters were interesting and the main character was so believable, it was fun flowing through and trying to figure out the big picture within was fun. It was well written. I am completely intrigued and amazed at how the story developed. Who knew Russian Dolls could be scary! Not sure how I feel about the cliffhanger at the end. But it was a magical, mystery adventure, what's not to love!

Caitlin Schanaker says

I was SO elated to win this ARC (my first ever!) of Charlie N. Holmberg's new book, and even more so once I started to read it. Creepy in the absolute best ways, this story is immediately entrancing and mysterious. I just LOVE this Russian dimension she's created with so many twists and turns and characters that were easy to root for and gasp over.

I find her writing so incredibly easy to disappear into. She utilizes wonderful imagery and the pace is perfect, sweeping you right up along with it.

Example:

"Matrona imagined her flush was made of thousands of biting ants, and the soft breeze blew them off her skin as she walked, carrying them back into the wood."

Amazing. As always her book features a creative brand of magic that is baffling but fascinating and accessible. There are bits of creeping horror mixed with fantasy (but I wouldn't say it's actually flat out scary, for those wondering). I just really enjoyed this book and couldn't stop thinking about it as I read through it, and still can't now that I'm done. As I experienced with another book of hers, Followed by Frost, as soon as I closed the last page I was all but devastated there wasn't more story to read.

I cannot wait to share this read with everyone I know once it releases July 25!!

abby says

Matrona lives in an isolated village. It's a close knit community where everyone knows everyone, and the church, and obedience to its teachings, is central to life. It's always summer, and the crops are always good. Life is quiet and uncomplicated-- the only strange things to have ever happened is when the potter's wife went mad and when Matrona's baby sister disappeared at three days old. The local tradesman, Slava, is the sole villager who has ever left; few others have even tried.

Matrona tries her best to be a dutiful daughter, and, at age 26, is settling to loveless marriage arrangement to make them happy. But her real affection lies with Jaska, the much younger son of the mad potter's wife. It's her secret, until everyone in the village finds out. How? Well, it starts with a collection of wooden dolls she accidentally stumbles upon inside Slava's house. There's one resembling each person in the village. When Slava discovers her snooping he insists Matrona become the next care taker of the strange dolls, staring by opening hers. When she does, strange things start to happen.

This book is ok. Matrona reads much younger than 26, and this book has a very YA vibe to it. It's not particularly inventive or memorable, but pleasant enough to read. The plot gets a little messy towards the end and the ultimate conclusion is pretty predictable.

Thank you to the publisher and NetGalley for granting me access to this ARC.

Vippi says

Life is the purest form of magic.

The Fifth Doll was a cute, original reading that let me taste Charlie N. Holmberg's fervent fantasy. The story had just that **delightfully creepy touch that kept me hooked till the end**. As doll after doll, layer after layer, the mystery unfolded, I became even more eager to know, to fully understand how deep and intricate were the secrets hidden within and beyond the dolls. I simply could not stop reading, that's it.

However.

Despite I overall enjoyed this book, I had the disturbing feeling that **something was missing**:

- ◆ Matrona was a pretty good main character, but she lacked some more development, and I could never really connect with her.
- ◆ The other characters (but Jaska) felt quite dull, one-dimensional.
- ◆ I would have liked 'more' even from Slava, (view spoiler)
- ◆ The plot got a little (too) messy towards the end, and the last chapters and the conclusion were too rushed, leaving me a bit confused at times and with too many unanswered questions.

All in all, a gripping, enjoyable reading, with – sadly – (one too) many little flaws.

(view spoiler)

~I received this book via NetGalley in an exchange for my honest review~

Clare says

OVERALL AVERAGE RATING: 3.3/5

World-building: 3/5

The world-building in general was pretty weak. The story was set in a remote village that's later revealed to be in Russia (though this is really a no-brainer since the cover has a Russian nesting doll). What confused me the most was the magic in the book. It didn't feel very well-thought out, and I often found myself wondering, "Well why didn't she do this?" or "Couldn't he have done it this way?" There were definitely holes in the way the magic worked in this book, and things that were left a little unexplained.

Characters: 3/5

I wasn't particularly impressed or moved by the characters in this book, and many of them were so-so in terms of depth and complexity. Matrona, the protagonist, was annoying. Much like a paper doll, she just felt one dimensional and lacked a more compelling personality. Even when she started to become more assertive, all I saw was her whining and griping. But maybe that's just me. Slava, however, was a pretty interesting character. There might have been potential to flesh out more of his backstory, but unfortunately, we only get a one chapter glimpse into why he did what he did.

Plot: 3.5/5

The story was compelling in some aspects, and then weak in others. I definitely liked the idea that each layer of the nesting doll contained a set of secrets or revelations. If anything, the revelation of those secrets was what kept me reading the book. Where the story started to fall apart for me was towards the end. I felt as though the whole backstory behind the dolls wasn't very well fleshed out. It seemed like the author was trying to situate it in the historical context of the time, but the historical context felt more like an afterthought. The author could've have definitely taken the time to develop that part of the story more. I also did not care for the little love story in the book. That was about as dry and dull as stale bread if I'm being honest.

Writing style: 3/5

The writing style was okay, though not particularly remarkable. The author was descriptive enough, but at times it seemed like she was overdoing it a little with the metaphors.

Entertainment: 4/5

Despite some of the weaknesses and holes in the story, I thought that the book as a whole was a good read. The premise of the story was definitely interesting. I know Holmberg's Paper Magician series is relatively popular, but right now, I don't think I'm particularly compelled to read her other books.

Simply Sam ? says

3.5 Stars

I have a feeling this book review is going to end up on the short, inchoherent side.

For one, I'm tired. Only because I've been up and at 'em since 7:00am with work, then domesticky stuff, then school junk.

For two, I'm stopping mid-note taking so I can write this up for posting in the AM. So I'm in a bit of a time crunch.

For three, I really don't have a ton to say about the book.

For four, did I mention I'm tired? Yeah, that.

Here's the thing: I've read almost all of Ms. Holmberg's stuff. It's really kind of weird. I never end up loving her works, but, at the same time, she creates some of the most incredible worlds. Her Paper Magicians series, the idea of origami as magic, it was just such a whimsical and breathtaking take on a magic system. I loved it. The magic system that is. The books...eh, well that's still kind of up in the air. Maybe one day when I read book 3 I'll know how I feel about the whole thing. And her stories always have an underlying darkness, which I kind of love. Followed by Frost, which is definitely my favorite, made me want to cry at the pain and the desolation surrounding Smitha's cursed existence. I can still feel the relentless, biting cold that permeated everything around her. It was exhausting and miserable and kind of hard for me to read.

The Fifth Doll wasn't quite like either of those (though it is similar to her Magic Bitter, Magic Sweet). It's really more of a fairy tale. Matrona is kind of like the village spinster. She's in her late 20s and not yet married. All that's about to change when she receives a marriage proposal from the village butcher. Finally! Her dream of becoming a wife is about to become a reality. It's all she's ever wanted, to be married, to have a home where she is loved and cherished.

But her plans, her dreams, her life are all about to become upended by the simple act of finding a paintbrush. Matrona, always one to do the right thing, knows that the paintbrush must belong to the village tradesman, Slava. Entering his home, with the intention of returning it, she discovers a secret: Slava has a collection of dolls that bear an uncanny resemblance to each person in the village. Matrona, in her curiosity, unwittingly alters one of the dolls, and that one alteration changes everything.

Somehow the dolls, the village, and Slava are all tied together. Slava, discovering Matrona's trespass, wants her to become his apprentice, but to do so, she must first open her 5 dolls, one every 3 days. As the secrets are revealed, Slava and his past become more and more menacing and Matrona becomes more and more desperate for answers. Matrona doesn't know who she can turn to with such weighty knowledge, but she ends up putting her trust in Jaska, a much younger butcher who she shamefully has feelings for. Together, they begin to peel back to layers of the Slava's secrets, and ultimately begin to reveal their true selves...

Once again, Ms. Holmberg has come up with this incredibly unique premise. The idea of lives being tied to these Russian nesting dolls was really, really interesting. But for some reason, the story did not live up to its potential. Slava, who is our "bad guy" in this story, is not really present enough to be a convincing villain. In my opinion, his biggest villainy was his unnecessary secret keeping, even after taking Matrona on as an

apprentice. That is such a peeve of mine. Matrona also mildly annoyed me. If I were her, I'd have been dying to learn Slava's secrets, but instead she fought him at every turn. And by fought, I meant she ran and hid just FYI. She wasn't a bad main character, I just think she was a little boring. In fact, I think that was the problem: it was all just a little bit boring. And the ending was just kind of ho-hum. It was fitting, I think. It was the optimal outcome, I think. But I wasn't really rooting for it one way or the other, if that makes sense.

However, this is a fairly short book and there are enough interesting parts to make it worth finishing. I listened to the audio book narrated by Angela Dawe, who I really like, so that also helped. I'd say, if you like books that have a fairy-tale-esque feel and are looking for a short, filler book then go ahead and give this a try. It's not life changing, it's not incredible, but it works well enough for what it is.
