



The Magicians

Lev Grossman

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A thrilling and original coming-of-age novel about a young man practicing magic in the real world

Quentin Coldwater is brilliant but miserable. A senior in high school, he's still secretly preoccupied with a series of fantasy novels he read as a child, set in a magical land called Fillory. Imagine his surprise when he finds himself unexpectedly admitted to a very secret, very exclusive college of magic in upstate New York, where he receives a thorough and rigorous education in the craft of modern sorcery.

He also discovers all the other things people learn in college: friendship, love, sex, booze, and boredom. Something is missing, though. Magic doesn't bring Quentin the happiness and adventure he dreamed it would. After graduation he and his friends make a stunning discovery: Fillory is real. But the land of Quentin's fantasies turns out to be much darker and more dangerous than he could have imagined. His childhood dream becomes a nightmare with a shocking truth at its heart.

At once psychologically piercing and magnificently absorbing, *The Magicians* boldly moves into uncharted literary territory, imagining magic as practiced by real people, with their capricious desires and volatile emotions. Lev Grossman creates an utterly original world in which good and evil aren't black and white, love and sex aren't simple or innocent, and power comes at a terrible price.

The Magicians Details

Date : Published May 25th 2010 by Penguin Books (first published August 11th 2009)

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Author : Lev Grossman

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From Reader Review The Magicians for online ebook

Jeffrey Keeten says

I passed on reading this book when it first came out because I was underwhelmed by the author's first book Codex. The excessively negative reviews about The Magicians peaked my interest. The complaints these reviewers had actually made me want to read the book. The positive reviews confirmed my growing suspicion that I should read this book. Although I am late to the party I must say I am glad that I overcame my initial reluctance because I loved this book.

Unfortunately this book was marketed as an adult book for Harry Potter fans. There is some truth in this marketing scheme, but too many people who are ardent Harry Potter fans are not the proper readership for this book. One reviewer said how much he despised this book, but that the "hipsters" would like it. What! Wait! does that mean I'm a hipster reader. I'm finally... cool. I probably just lost my hipster status using the word cool.

I was afraid that this would be a year one, year two, etc. magical school book series. Not so. Grossman smokes through 5 years of Brakebills in quick order giving us highlights, but leaving a lean script that keeps the pages turning.

One of my favorite scenes is when the main character Quentin Coldwater and his friends are turning into geese to fly to Brakebills South in Antarctica. *"Days, weeks, maybe months and years passed. Who knew or cared? Quentin had never experienced peace and satisfaction like this. He forgot about his human past, about Brakebills or Brooklyn. Why hang on to them? He had no name anymore. He barely had any individual identity, and he didn't want one. What good were such human artifacts? He was an animal. His job was to turn bugs and plants into muscle and fat and feathers and flight and miles logged. He served only his flock-fellows and the wind and the laws of Darwin. And he served whatever force sent him gliding along the invisible magnetic rails, always southward, down the rough, stony coast of Peru, spiny Andes on his port, the sprawling blue Pacific on his starboard. He had never been happier."* I actually found myself really thinking about what it would be like to be a goose.

Professor Mayakovsky the teacher at Brakebills South really turns boys and girls into men and women. It is the boot camp of magic. Mayakovsky sums it up to Quentin on his first day. *"You need to do more than memorize, Quentin. You must learn the principles of magic with more than your head. You must learn them with your bones, with your blood, your liver, your heart, your deek. He grabbed his crotch through his dressing gown and gave it a shake."* Long before the reader gets to this point they will be well aware that they are not hanging out in Hogwarts, but I think this sentence illustrates the difference in approach that Grossman takes with Brakebills.

Grossman doesn't shy away from Harry Potter. He actually makes a couple of references to the Hogwarts series. They are books in the evolving reality of the world he creates for this book. Our heroes, be they too human, moments of bravery wrapped around acts of cowardice finally arrive in Fillory. I was least interested in this portion of the book which makes me wonder if I will like the follow up book The Magician King. I've underestimated Grossman before so at some point I will give it a try.

Most of the time I didn't even realize that I was reading a fantasy book. The characters reminded me of people that I went to college with. Grossman actually does a good job developing the characters. They are all interesting, flawed, very human characters that again made me believe in the reality of this world. I suppose

because there is sex and copious alcohol consumption, although not flagrantly so, reviewers have made comparisons to Bret Easton Ellis. I will say all of the sex was in the context of the plot and even sometimes gave the plot a proper nudge. I have also seen comparisons to Donna Tartt and to me that is a closer comparison because the characters had more personality than what I experienced in *Less than Zero*.

If you are looking for Harry Potter even an adult Harry Potter you should probably give this book a pass. If you are looking for just a damn good edgy book with well developed characters and a compelling plot than pick up a copy and start reading. Before you know it you will have consumed 100 pages and will be stealing time from the rest of your life to finish the remaining pages.

Nataliya says

'You can't just decide to be happy.'

'No, you can't. But you can sure as hell decide to be miserable. Is that what you want?'

The answer to this, as far as Quentin Coldwater is concerned, is a resounding 'YES!' At any stage of his life. He makes Holden Caulfield look like a bundle of sunshine. **He makes Charlie Brown resemble an embodiment of optimism and positivity.** Eeyore the Donkey is brimming with life force compared to our perpetually unhappy hero.

'...You couldn't have everything. Or at least the available evidence pointed overwhelmingly to that conclusion.'

...

Not only will he always think of a cup as being half-empty, but he will drive himself crazy wondering who the hell drank half of it to make it so. Hand him his deepest dream on a silver platter - and five minutes later he will be whining in a decidedly disillusioned fashion about how it fails to make him happy. Disillusionment and dissatisfaction are how he operates.

If ennui were to be a superpower, Quentin Coldwater would have been Superman, propelled into space by the power of his constant negativity.

...

'All of it just confirmed his belief that his real life, the life he should be living, had been mislaid through some clerical error by the cosmic bureaucracy. This couldn't be it. It had been diverted somewhere else, to somebody else, and he'd been issued this shitty substitute faux life instead.'

In *'The Magicians'* Lev Grossman goes against the popular device of literature - the allure of wish fulfillment, the deep-rooted belief that once you find that secret place in life where you belong things will magically be alright and you will be happy. (*)

(*) Granted, he goes against the literary mainstream while at the same time using the obviously commercially successful formula of a young protagonist with a newly found magical ability who suddenly finds himself in an equivalent of a British boarding school (well, in this case, a college. In Upstate New York. But it's still a British boarding school, really). (view spoiler)

So it seems that Grossman tries to get out of mainstream while firmly staying in the commercially successful mainstream. Mmmmm-kay.

Anyhow, unlike what we are supposed to expect, **Quentin, miserable and disillusioned in the quasi-grown-up way that quite a few teens seem to be**, does not find happiness in his unexpected admission to Brakebills, a magical college. Apparently he learns that - surprise! - you cannot just be handed happiness, that you actually need to put some effort into it, and that you can easily poison anything, even a fairy-tale, if you approach anything from the vantage point of pseudo-sophisticated negativity.

'Every ambition he'd ever had in his life had been realized the day he was admitted to Brakebills, and he was struggling to formulate a new one with any kind of practical specificity.'

Actually, **the aura of overly disillusioned ennui-infused pseudo-sophistication in the faux-adult way** (the way that tends to overstate almost explicitly that it's *SO NOT Harry Potter and the like*) permeates this entire book, getting in the way of pacing, character development and ultimately many readers' enjoyment.

As Quentin mechanically stumbles through his four years of quasi-British education in the self-pitying perpetually drunken haze, **the plot stammers all over the place, never picking up a consistent pace, never leading to the reader actually caring about what happens to this set of miserable characters**. So many situations are introduced and incompletely dealt with, without much consequence and/or resolution. So many potentially interesting storylines are never pursued further, with Grossman choosing to focus on the less exciting parts of this story. And a belated infusion of plot about three quarters into the book, after a long and befuzzling journey through Quentin's magical education, comes way overdue and at this point fails to impress and, frankly, begins to irritate.

All this while Quentin, despite his apparently staggering intellect, acts like a frustratingly clueless idiot and makes you want to reach into the book and shake some sense into him. And all of this just to see him come to even greater depths of self-pity and annoying in their platitude 'revelations':

'He wasn't in a safe little story where wrongs were automatically righted; he was still in the real world, where bad bitter things happened for no reason, and people paid for things that weren't their fault.'

And with this deep realization, Quentin gets this timeless piece of advice that summarizes the entire point of this story in addition to the message that things tend to suck quite badly (insert sarcasm here if you'd like):

'You found out, didn't you? There's no getting away from yourself. Not even in Fillory.'

Hey, I do not mind reading about the characters who are childish and stupid and very self-centered. What I expect is that in a series of events (a.k.a. plot) they will actually grow and change and learn something - something to make me feel that it was worth reading the book for. Even Holden Caulfield seems to change and grow up a bit, despite his uber-teenageness.

Quentin and his friends, on the other hand, do not appear to grow up in any way; they are contentedly stuck in the perpetual aimlessness and inflated self-pity, all while flaunting their oh-so-special disillusionment which reminds me of pointless drunk 'adult' college conversations that lead nowhere -

and I'm left a bit annoyed and irritated by it all.

Anyway, **2.5 stars**. Not a horrible book, but not that good either. Just kinda 'meh', honestly. It left me not really caring about what happened or what will happen next - and that's not really a good sign. Quentin can brood himself into oblivion - I don't care much.

'For just one second, look at your life and see how perfect it is. Stop looking for the next secret door that is going to lead you to your real life. Stop waiting. This is it: there's nothing else. It's here, and you'd better decide to enjoy it or you're going to be miserable wherever you go, for the rest of your life, forever.'

Raeleen Lemay says

I tried. I really tried.

Aside from enjoying the beginning, reading this book is like staring at a piece of cardboard for hours on end. It's just verryyyyyyy dull to me and I don't care about it one bit. I may give it another chance someday, but no promises.

However, I do want to give the tv series a shot, because I really didn't hate the characters or the world, I just can't get into the way they were written in this book.

Lola says

I think I'll just stick with the TV series, because this is terrible.

Cindy says

Okay I am in the minority I didn't really like this book. I didn't think it was going to be a Harry Potter, as a matter of fact I knew it wouldn't be even though it was compared to HP.... the author even compared it to HP which its not.

I can enjoy that this is a "tribute" to fantasy..... but that's about it. It was a depressing poorly written book. Details seemed to be lacking and the only details we'd get is a knock off version of another fantasy book. The characters were one sided and had no personality, they were just a name in a book really.

There was occasional swearing to make this book more adult but really it was unnecessary. Also there was a lot of breast looking and sex which didn't really add to the plot line.

The writing was very poor, there was a lot of repetition to the words. Almost every sentence started with Quenten..... Quenten.....

This was a very big disappointment for me because I would have thought the idea was a great one. The poor writing, and badly executed plot made it a disappointment.

I think this is another case of highly publicized book that is only hype.

Kasia says

I was ready to love this book, it's supposed to be Harry Potter like but more gritty, more realistic, more substantial, and I guess it is and I still like the idea of it. And yet this book did not work for me. I was really patient with it, I downplayed the initial irritation of incorporating the entire Potter premise. It's one thing to borrow bits and pieces, it's another to rip off a whole concept leaving out a few bits here and there and dressing up the rest. But since I'm a sucker for fantasy, so I was willing to let that go. Mimicry is the highest form of flattery, right? Mimic all you want, just make the story interesting and magical.

But the story... Meh.

The story lacked in optimism, was devoid of magic and the main character? I tried to like him, I understood him, I did not hate him, but I never really warmed up to him or to any of the other characters either. And what Grossman was trying to get across was a bit of a downer, outwardly depressing at times. It felt like he was striving to make the book something more than a mere fantasy novel, striving to grasp a deeper truth, striving to incorporate some existentialism into the story. Whatever. It might have strived but in the end it failed. At least it failed me. I would have liked it better if Grossman got in peace with the thought that you're writing a fantasy novel, and left it at that. There's nothing wrong with fantasy, not everything has to be high lit. So Mr. Grossman if you like me for your fan, don't take yourself that seriously, throw me a bone next time and put in some magic and a few optimistic thoughts into the story. Because you had the potions and the spells and all that shit, but in the end, it did not feel magical, not to me.

Mary ~Ravager of Tomes~ says

What would you do if tomorrow your Hogwarts letter came in the mail? What about if your closet became a portal to Narnia?

Suddenly there is a sharp line in the sand, dividing your life into two phases: Before Magic and After Magic.

The Magicians analyzes this concept with the very deepest, **darkest** pits of human sin in mind. It is an exploration of realistic responses to unrealistic circumstances.

"I got my heart's desire...and there my troubles began."

This is not a book for people who prefer their heroes be unambiguously "good". This is not a book you read to your children in hopes that they will derive some higher meaning about morality and friendship.

It will devour all of the things you relish in stories like *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It will intentionally draw your attention toward your expectations only to **shatter** them into pieces.

For those of you who have seen *Cabin in the Woods*, this book falls into the same category with that film. This is not "Adult Harry Potter."

The magic in this story is not pretty or flamboyant. It is tedious, difficult to grasp. Part of the mastery of this book is how Grossman paralleled his writing style to match that of the magic style.

The pace here is *slowwwwwwwwww*, but it's a necessary slowness. The language used has a very cynical quality and I could even see where it may come off as offensive.

However, I think it's important to distinguish that the language here is used as a mechanism for characterization and setting a tone, not to reflect the approval of said language by the author.

I had a really great time reading this, and I'm excited to keep exploring this idea in last two installments. That being said, this isn't a story that everyone will be able to appreciate. I think that's apparent by just how mixed the reviews are.

If you like your humor & your characters made up of morally black and grey fiber, this isn't one to miss out on.

This review and other reviews of mine can be found on Book Nest!

Buddy read this with my passionate reader friend, Jack!

Stephen says

5.0 stars. I ABSOLUTELY LOVED THIS BOOK!!!! I know that not everyone agrees with this sentiment for this book, but I was greatly impressed by it. From the very beginning of this story, I got the distinct feeling that Grossman was going to be taking "the less travelled path" in his fantasy novel. While I have seen a lot of comparisons to other stories (some of which are quite intentional by the author) this book is certainly ITS OWN BOOK.

The novel is really two very different and distinct stories that I thought worked together very well. The first half to two-thirds of the book is the story of Quentin Coldwater, a brilliant, angst-ridden, self-involved high school senior. Or, put another way, a pretty normal teenager that happens to be intellectually gifted. While Quentin is on his way to be interviewed for acceptance at Princeton, he is (through a series of circumstances I won't spoil) given the opportunity to enroll in a secret university that teaches magic. You can tell from that description how the Harry Potter comparisons come up. However, this "magic" school and the students that attend there are portrayed (quite effectively in my opinion) as the kind of personalities you would expect to find at a college campus for gifted teenagers. Common threads running through the group based on some shared intellectual capabilities, but otherwise a very eclectic group from a variety of backgrounds and all dealing with their own very real issues. In addition, the teaching of magic is shown to be a extremely difficult and an often tedious endeavor. I thought this aspect of the book was superbly done and made for compelling reading.

One other interesting (to me at least) aspect of Quentin that I think bears mentioning is that he is a HUGE FANTASY FANBOY and so the discovery that magic is real makes him believe that all of his dreams are going to come true and that he is going to be able to live out the dream of being a part of a real life fantasy

adventure. I can imagine there are a number of us that could relate to that. However, reality, even one with magic, is never as easy or as fun as Quentin's books make them out to be and so he finds himself disappointed and disillusioned a lot. In fact, his extensive knowledge of other fantasy worlds actually makes the disappointment more acute.

Frankly, I don't see how it could be any other way and that this relationship to fiction and reality is one of the central themes that Grossman was exploring in this novel. Thus, I found one of the book's central messages to be that part of growing up is *reconciling your childhood dreams with the realities of everyday life, AND STILL FINDING A WAY TO BE HAPPY!!!* Some people found this to be a sad or depressing message, but I didn't find it that way at all. I think we all see the world differently now than we did when we were kids and that doesn't mean we are less happy.

Anyway, Quentin's favorite fantasy series is about a land called Fillory which very intentionally resembles Narnia complete with siblings going through a wardrobe to a strange land ruled by giant, god-like animals (a Ram named Ember rather than a lion named Aslan). This is important because Fillory plays a central role in the last part of the novel which I will not go into so as to avoid spoilers. I will just say that the last third of the novel becomes a fairly typical fantasy adventure in structure, but whose execution is in keeping with the tone and style of the rest of the story. In other words, Fillory is NOT YOUR PARENTS' NARNIA. As with the first two thirds of the book, I found this to be well written and compelling.

Overall, I can not recommend this book highly enough. I thought the writing was superb, the characters were three dimensional and very well developed and the world-building was amazing, especially in regards to how the fantastic was made to seem so real. **HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!!**

Simeon says

The story of a quasi-sociopathic high school cretin who mouth-breathes his way into an exclusive fantasy club of anhedonic wizards - replete with bad writing and worse story-telling.

Enjoy.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com:]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

(UPDATE: After reading other reviews online, I realized that I could've made my point even more succinctly by simply saying the following: "Oh, wonderful -- another dour academe writes another fussy, joyless genre exercise, designed specifically for MFA circle-jerks who consider themselves 'above' such silly frippery.

Yeah, that's exactly what the world needed." I like that review much more than my original one below, which as commenters have already noted, sounds like I didn't get the fact that Grossman deliberately ripped off the Harry Potter storyline, precisely to make the point that such a world would actually be fussy and joyless. I get that Grossman deliberately ripped off Harry Potter; my point is that he's an untalented f-cking hack for doing so, and that such a thing is profoundly offensive to those of us who *are* adult genre fans, and who *do* enjoy the Harry Potter books precisely for their sense of joy and wonder.)

Regular readers know that I mostly judge books here on relative terms -- relative to the author's experience, relative to my natural interest in its subject, relative to the amount of money that was spent promoting that book. And that's why I was so excited to get my hands on Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, one of the most heavily hyped books of last autumn, because it comes with an excellent pedigree: written by the main book critic for *Time* magazine, it is purportedly an inventive urban-fantasy tale described by many as "Harry Potter for grown-ups" (or technically, "Harry Potter meets Narnia for grown-ups," the milieu of each taking up either half of Grossman's own novel), and with a whole series of gushing blurbs on the back cover from a whole series of impressive authors, with no less than Junot Diaz calling it "stirring, complex and adventurous." (Of course, this nicely illustrates as well the inherent ethical problems with a book reviewer writing and publishing their own creative work; because who's to say that any of these quoted authors actually meant any of the praise they give, and aren't instead terrified of Grossman doing a hatchet job on their own books for refusing to play along? That's why I'm such a stickler for the idea that professional book reviewers should *never, ever* publish their own creative work in the field of whatever type of literature they're paid to review, and why a big red flag goes up in my head every time one of them does.)

And it's for all these reasons that this book's massive shortcomings made me not just disappointed but actively infuriated; because when people say that this is "Harry Potter for grown-ups," they mean that it is a *literal beat-for-beat plagiaristic ripoff of the Harry Potter books*, such a thoroughly naked steal of someone else's ideas that I'm legitimately surprised that JK Rowling hasn't sued Grossman back into the stone age. Don't believe me? Well, just look at the evidence -- it's about a group of teenagers who receive mysterious invitations to attend a magic school, housed in a crumbling gothic castle located several hours north of a major metropolitan area, hidden from the public by powerful illusion spells and full of delightfully quirky tics like moving staircases and disappearing doors, overseen by a wise but childlike white-bearded authority figure, who just happens to own a magical map showing the location of all residents at any given moment, where for some reason all renovations seem to have been banned somewhere around the middle of the Victorian Age, which for an equally inexplicable reason has adopted both the structure and even the terms of the British educational system despite being an American school, whose students enjoy on the weekends an intercollegiate sport that's much like the magical version of a human game, and where it turns out that spell-casting is actually a fairly tedious academic process of memorization and proper inflection. J-sus, Grossman, you untalented hack, why don't you throw in a Golden F-cking Snitch while you're at it?

Now, I acknowledge that genre novels by nature are always going to share a certain amount of elements with other novels in that genre, and in fact I have no problem with that when it's done well and used merely as a starting point; for an excellent example, see Susanna Clarke's fantastic *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, which takes a very Potteresque concept (magic actually exists in open hiding all around us) but instead does something strikingly original with the idea, creating an entire millennium-long fake history of the UK and then focusing in on the dysfunctional fuddy-duddys who are the masters of this made-up applied science. But in *The Magicians*, Grossman presents *not even a single solitary idea* that he didn't steal from someone else, essentially making the whole thing feel like the unnecessary fan-fiction product of some 17-year-old goth girl who's jealous that Rowling beat her to the punch; and while that would be fine if this actually was a piece of xeroxed fan fiction from a 17-year-old goth girl with no original ideas of her own, it's *f-cking inexcusable* when it's the most heavily hyped book of the year, and comes from the main book critic of *Time* f-cking magazine. J-sus, what a godd-mned waste of my time this derivative piece of sh-t was. **F-CK YOU, LEV GROSSMAN**, for stealing a week of my life that I will never get back.

Out of 10: **0.0**

Stepheny says

Prepare yourselves for a rant-filled scathing review. So. Much. Hate.

When I read the Martian I really never thought there would be a book I would hate more. But boy am I putting my foot in my mouth on that one! The Magicians was the winner by a landslide for **The Most Obnoxious Book of the Year Award!**

Congratulations, Lev Grossman! Your book fucking sucks.

This book was said to be the “adult version of Harry Potter.” Those are some big balls you have making that claim. Especially to someone like me. This is NOT anywhere near as good as Harry Potter. In fact, you may as well compare hippogriffs to flobberworms! I mean, seriously. The two aren't even in the same realm, let alone the same fucking genre. Everything that Harry Potter is is exactly what the Magicians isn't.

Now, I can forgive the idiot who decided to use the slogan “the adult version of Harry Potter” to help sell the Magicians. Clearly that person is a fucking moron who never read either book. It's ok, I've forgiven him/her. What I can't forgive is Lev Grossman creating the most obnoxious character I have ever encountered. That's right! Step aside, Bella! Quentin has taken your place atop the list of Most Useless Main Character!

Quentin is...oh dear. I am not even sure where to start. Quentin is just awful. He's plagued with self-loathing and yet so incredibly full of himself that he he's blinded by his own shit because his head is crammed up his own ass. The dumbass actually has the audacity to demean his girlfriend for cheating on him after he cheated on her. He acts as if he is completely innocent and then rips her to pieces verbally. That's just one example but my god, what the fuck is wrong with you?! Great storytelling, Lev!

The only memorable moment for me throughout this heaping pile of shit book was that they got turned into geese where they flew to the south pole...or was it the north? Ah, fuck it. It doesn't matter anyway because the whole storyline was pointless. Anyway, they later get turned into arctic foxes and then they fuck. The single most exciting moment in the whole entire book.

But listen, this book has absolutely no point. None. Quentin figures out he is a special snowflake- shocker. And then goes to school at the Special Snowflake Academy where he learns some magic tricks. But no one knows where the magic comes from you know. Like it's apart of your being, ya know. And it's all like hipster meets grunge mentality there. Everyone is so fucking privileged but they do nothing but bitch about their parents and life. Oh. And the school? Well, that could have been interesting. But instead we get barely half of the book worth of schooling before they are all graduated and find out that their lives don't matter.

They can do everything. But...DUN DUN DUN! They can also do *nothing*! Fascinating. No?

No. I suppose you're right.

I almost never tell people not to read books. But if you value your sanity I would stay far, far away from this book. What a disappointment. I will not be continuing the series. I do not care what happens to anyone in it. I don't care to see how the story progresses. I do not care one bit. So please, do not tell me how awesome the rest of them are. I will ~~kill you~~ lock you up in my basement and feed you to Jeff and Mr. KIng.

Dan Schwent says

Quentin Coldwater is an unhappy teen, eyeing up an uncertain future in college. He's secretly in love with his friend Julia. Nothing else really matters to him except the Fillory and Further series of books he's loved since childhood. Imagine how he feels when a seemingly routine college interview drops an undiscovered Fillory book in his grasp and leads him to Brakebills, a college of wizardry, and worlds beyond...

First of all, this isn't Harry Potter for adults, no matter how much people want to slap that label on it. Although if you expanded that label to **Harry Potter for cynical adults who've read Harry Potter and don't think it's the greatest series ever written**, it would be more accurate. It has a superficial resemblance to Harry Potter in that both books involve learning to be a wizard. That's about it. Parts of it remind me of Stephen King's *The Talisman*, while others reminded me of *Wizard of Earthsea*, and the magic reminds me of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*.

In a nutshell, *The Magicians* depicts what would happen if regular people went to a college for wizards, complete with parties, sex, drugs, cursing, and making stupid choices. The characters make mistakes and act like normal people, not heroes. Quentin's never happy, not even in his relationship with Alice or his friendships with the other wizards.

One thing that stands out in *The Magicians* is the magic. It's not fake latin and waving wands around. It's taxing and has consequences and learning it is extremely difficult. One character's speculation that magic might be the tools left behind after the universe was created really sticks in my mind.

The back cover says it's a coming of age story. It is, and the moral of the story is Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it.

nostalgebraist says

This was in a special category for me: books whose positive reception make me question my membership in

the human race. After finishing it I stared at the glowing blurbs on the back, looked up some positive reviews online, and thought, *who are these people? What could they have been thinking? How could they possibly be so different from me?* After that it took a few days of solid social interaction with good friends to convince me that I actually had something in common with my fellow humans -- that they weren't a bunch of ineffable Lovecraftian things hiding in bodies that looked like mine.

(The most extreme version of this experience I've ever had was with Special Topics in Calamity Physics, a book widely praised but so staggeringly, contortedly bad that when I tried to review it, I got to 4300 words and gave up in despair because I hadn't even half exhausted all the issues I had with it.)

What *The Magicians* very clearly wants to be is a darker, more realistic, more laddish version of Harry Potter or Narnia, combining the cutesy, whimsical worldbuilding of children's fantasy with adolescent protagonists who are horrible little shits in the way real adolescents are horrible little shits. So far, so good, I guess -- I mean it could have been a really funny parody, at least. However, Grossman isn't really going for parody. His book is rarely laugh-out-loud funny, and he seems to want the reader to feel invested in his characters and impressed with the psychological realism of his twist on the fantasy novel. Unfortunately, I was unable to rise to this task, because of the following basic fact about *The Magicians*:

Everything in this book is determined by Grossman's desire to imitate or respond to his literary models, not by considerations of human behavior. The characters don't act the way they do because real people (or even some distorted version of real people) would act that way, but because their actions contrast with the way Grossman imagines a "standard" children's fantasy character would behave in the same situation. The fantasy world(s) in which the story is set do not make sense, but are supposed to be impressive simply because they are darker and grittier than their literary models. If you stop thinking of everything as a genre joke and start thinking of it as an actual story about people, it falls apart completely.

This is especially bad because the Grossman yearns to be patted on the back for writing a "realistic" fantasy novel. But unlike, say, China Mieville, he doesn't try for realism by seriously thinking about how the darker side of human nature would play itself out in a magical world. He just takes a set of models (HP and Narnia), makes them darker and more vulgar (in implausible and nonsensical ways), and then, having conflated edginess with realism, sits back and expects us to be impressed.

For the first two-thirds of the book, the primary model is Harry Potter, and the primary "realistic" twist is that the characters in magic school are *bored*. Although the main characters are all very impressed with the idea of learning magic when they first reach the magic school (which as in HP resides in a coexisting culture kept secret by magic), they quickly lose interest and start spending all of their time drinking to excess, playing pool, and bitching about people they know and the general tedium of their little lives. This is kind of a funny idea, but the transition from curiosity to indifference is not made real. The characters simply go from one pole to the other in the course of a very short number of pages (covering months of in-story time). As with everything else in the book, Grossman seems to have been so pleased with his clever twist on his literary models that he didn't think he needed to make it psychologically natural. The characters are bored, and being bored is unadmirable, and that means it's realistic -- what more psychology do you need?!

The characters' incuriosity spares Grossman from having to fill in many of the details of his fantasy world -- if no one asks a question, the reader never hears its answer. Harry Potter also relies on this mechanism, but it makes much more sense there because the characters are younger. They enter magic school around age 12 -- an age when many people are still forming their basic worldviews. As a result, it's easy to imagine that they just take the existence of magic in stride, rather than going around grabbing lapels and demanding explanations. Grossman's characters, though, are 18 when the book begins, and it's difficult for me to

imagine an 18-year-old who wouldn't freak out in some way when confronted with the existence of a hidden magic world. Remember, the characters are literally discovering a vast conspiracy -- wizards have been hiding magic from everyone for centuries. Why do they do it? Why don't wizards use magic to improve the world of ordinary humans? Harry Potter at least makes gestures towards answering these questions; The Magicians doesn't even do that, because the main characters -- bafflingly -- don't seem to give a shit.

Grossman even goes out of his way to specify at the beginning that his protagonist, Quentin Coldwater, is a physics nerd who, at 18, is taking college-level advanced physics classes. (I was pleased to see him name-check Differential Geometry, which is exactly the sort of subject that such an advanced high school student might know a few things about.) Now, I also like physics, and if I were transported to magic land one of the things I would ask, in the course of my frantic label-grabbing question-asking "how can this be fucking possible?" tour, is how magic interacts with the laws of fundamental physics. I mean, physicists have developed these theories that seem to explain everything we can observe, and yet there's this extremely powerful force out there which could be harnessed by weird crusty old dudes centuries ago yet has escaped the notice of modern physics entirely? How?! Well, that's a question that Harry Potter sure isn't interested in answering, and one might hope that a book that fancies itself a grown-up HP, especially with a physics-nerd protagonist, would concern itself with it. Nope! Quentin doesn't care. He basically forgets about physics after the first few chapters. I understand that some people get less nerdy when they get to college, but come on -- at least show me the psychological process, Grossman. Later on there's a part where Quentin's studious girlfriend is working on a thesis about how to magically violate the uncertainty principle (ha!) and Quentin just thinks it's boring. Again, things work by the logic of clichés rather than the logic of psychology -- in the beginning Quentin is playing a nerd and later on he's playing a jaded college senior and his ostensible interests just adjust to fit the cliché of the moment.

Why are these people so unhappy? They are in college learning a fascinating subject, their personal lives seem to involve no special difficulties above and beyond those of the average privileged college student, so where's the problem? Grossman so thoroughly fails to provide a motivation (remember, it's dark, so it *must* be realistic) that it starts to seem like all of the characters, and particularly Quentin, are probably just clinically depressed. This raises the question, though, of why none of them even consider this. The book covers seven years of magic school in a few hundred pages, which is a pretty remarkable span of time in which to be miserable and never ever think about why (except "magic land didn't satisfy me like I thought it would" -- again, good genre subversion but bad psychology -- why don't they wonder *why* they are unsatisfied?). The characters start out as 18-year-olds with the maturity of 14-year-olds and end up as 25-year-olds with the maturity of 14-year-olds. It's conceivable that someone could change this little in seven years, but again -- give me the damn psychology, Grossman.

The only likable character in all of this is a sort of punk-ish nerd who the main characters all hate because he's really awkward, even though he spends all of his time doing interesting shit rather than drinking and bitching. Is this some kind of joke about how even in magic land (paradise for nerds?) awkward people will get treated poorly? But then we're supposed to sympathize deeply with the main characters and the difficulties they face as boring entitled assholes and I just don't get it. Where is my entry-way into these characters? I've read and enjoyed a lot of books about really awful people, but in all of those cases there was something that rang very true about the characters' particular brand of awfulness. Grossman's characters aren't awful in a way that feels real, they're just awful as a genre joke. Ha, bet you've never seen Harry Potter starring an asshole before! Nope, I haven't. But *why* is he an asshole? What's going on in his head? Come on, this is Creative Writing 101 stuff!

In the last third of the book we switch over from Potter pastiche to Narnia pastiche and there's some metafictional stuff and a bunch of thematic stuff I would probably discuss if I cared more about what

Grossman is trying to do. But I don't. His handling of his themes is so crude and inhuman that I just don't care what he's trying to say.

There were a few scenes that I did really like, mostly those about elements of the fantasy world itself -- like a scene where the characters transform into birds and fly to Antarctica, or one about a powerful and sinister wizard who looks like Magritte's "Son of Man" painting. These scenes make me think that, ironically, Grossman would do much better if he tried to write a more ordinary, non-subversive fantasy novel. But this imaginative stuff never lasts for long, because Grossman has to keep us regularly updated on the characters' horrible lust triangles and how *totally* shitfaced they were last night. Blech.

Emily (Books with Emily Fox) says

(3.5? I might change it later) After deliberation I decided that the best way to describe this book is...

A muggle born Draco Malfoy who grew up reading about Narnia, learns that magic is real and Narnia might be too...

I think my main issue with his book was my own expectations. Too often people describe this book as Harry Potter books for grown ups and it's just not how I see it. The main character (all the characters actually!) is a depressed, "Iamverysmart" young adult who gets to go to a magical school thinking it's finally the answer to his unhappiness.

The pacing is what left me the most unsatisfied. The first hundred pages, the main character is introduced, he passes the exams and goes through the first 2 years of school.... IN 100 PAGES!!
He's done with school at around 200 pages. That's half the book!

If I had known that, I would have probably have enjoyed the book a lot more. I'm not sure I liked the ending... but I'm definitely planning on continuing the series and cannot wait to see where it goes!

So basically to enjoy this book you'll have to remember that the characters are unlikeable, only half the book contains the magical school so there won't be much "everyday life a la Harry Potter" here and that the school is basically just to open the magical universe.

I'll watch the TV Show and update you :)

Mike (the Paladin) says

Originally reviewed in Sept. 2010

I have a Goordreads friend who likes this book. He expressed a thought that I might not. While not wholly correct about my take he came pretty close.:

Well, first Stephen, you're right in a way, I don't like stories that are "downers just to be downers". The nihilistic attitude you see so often. I don't like the (as I've said before) "life is crap and then you die" story.

So many today seem to think that for a story to have any depth it has to be deeply depressing.

On the other hand if there is a reason for the sadness in a story then it makes sense (for example Julius Winsome,(Julius Winsome) (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) one of the saddest books out there, but wonderful and highly recommended).

But you were close to right about this one. It has (in my opinion) a lot of flaws. I'm sorry I feel this way for Dawn just gave it 5 stars and I agree with her on some books. So, please don't be insulted that we disagree here.

I don't hate this book, but neither do I really care for it. For much of it's length it could be said that the book actually has no plot. It's a series of events in the life of Quentin and the other students at Brakebills magical college. Some books can get away with this (Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell for example) and still be excellent reads simply by dint of world building and characterization. This one sadly didn't manage it. It sort of stumbles along giving us insight into the personality of Quentin, Elliot, Janet, and Alice, which we "do use later" (every time I use that phrase I recall Andy Griffith using it in his "retelling" of Hamlet), and finally gets around to a story line maybe three quarters of the way through.

The book has been compared to Harry Potter and Narnia. Well, I suppose if Harry were a selfish, snotty, creep...and Narnia had been conceived and written about by Stephen King this could be at least close to true. (Though King is a better writer.) In great part some of this book strikes me as written by someone (Lev Grossman) who wants to drag worlds where there is any hint of innocence and undiluted goodness into our tainted world and rub them down good with filth. This is a disillusioned, sad, and corrupted version of "the magical story". And also of magic worlds. It's not an "adult" take on it, it's a "disillusioned, tainted" take on it. It is a nihilist take on life in general told using the mode of a magic world.

(view spoiler)

(view spoiler)

I was under the impression also when I bought this book that it was one of the few to come out recently that was a stand alone novel, naive of me I admit. I see on the last page an add to watch for "The Magic King". I doubt I'll follow this volume up. I'm pretty sure at least I won't buy it as I did this one. So, 2 stars not one I'll reread.

Finally I think (sadly) that Mr. Grossman (and possibly the audience he's attempting to appeal to) more or less sneer at the literary worlds he is supposedly giving homage to here. It put's me in mind of "kids" who attempt to "ironically enjoy" things actually sneering at them all the while. The sad part is that thinking themselves to be "above it all" they actually miss the joy and...yes the magic of the things at which they sneer and look down.

No. I really don't care for and can't recommend this book. Barely 2 stars.

Update May 2016

Having watched one season of the TV series based on this book and finding it "not bad" I decided to reread

the book and see if my view or views on it would have changed.

Nope, sorry. While I sort of liked the series (1st season) I stilol think the same about the book.

By the way, I also lost interest in the TV series after a couple of episodes in the next season so...sigh. Oh well.

Anne says

Pretend Harry Potter was a bit of a narcissistic douchebag, and all of his friends were whiny a-holes who drank too much.

Now pretend that they crammed 5 years worth of their Hogwarts adventures into one book. Except most of the adventures are fairly mundane, with a few exceptions sprinkled here and there.

Then pretend at the very end of said book, they all took a trip to a warped version of Narnia...with mixed results.

Now, if you're the type of reader who absolutely *has* to like the main character, or feels like you need to at the very least *sympathize* with them?

Then you may want to give this one a pass.

I knew going into it that this was a story populated with moody dickholes, so that part of it didn't bother me.

What I *didn't* realize was that this was going to be a fairly random, rambling book. It just sort of goes along at its own pace, telling the story it wants to tell, without much regard to how much you want it to *get to the fucking point* already.

The short version?

Quentin finds out he's one of the elite few magicians in the world, and then embarks on a rather dull journey to find his place in the world.

Ok, now having said all of that, you may be wondering why I gave this 4 stars.

Well, first off, because I read the shit out of it. I can't for the life of me pinpoint *why*, but I didn't want to put it down. I just *had* to keep reading. And I had a lot of stuff to do that weekend!

And, second, I really enjoyed the way the story sort of started out one way and then ended up in a completely different spot than I thought it would.

Full circle craziness! <--in the blandest way imaginable, of course.

Oh, and for those of you who are wondering?

Yeah, this is absolutely *nothing* like the television show. And by **absolutely nothing** I mean, *duh*, it has stuff in common! Hello? It's *based* on the books! But it looks like they took the *general idea* of the books and made a show out of it, instead of making a faithful rendition of the story.

Anyhoo. I probably wouldn't have read this if I hadn't started bingeing the show on Netflix one Saturday with my son. But after 6 or 7 episodes we were kinda burned out. It felt like a low budget show about whiners at a college for magic, and neither of us felt like pressing *Next Episode*.

BUT.

I *was* curious enough to see what inspired it...

I'll be the first to admit this is a **Not For Everyone** book, but I enjoyed it. Then again, I like weird stuff...

Emily May says

I know this is a thing us bibliophiles really shouldn't say EVER, but: **I think the show is way better.**

Don't hurt me.

When I started watching the SYFY version of *The Magicians* and actually really liked it, I made a quick mental note to go back and read this book first before I got too far into it. Because the book can usually be relied on to be better, I wanted to experience it in written format first. In this case, though, the book makes **the story more boring, the characters downright insufferable, and it contains less of an emotional pull.**

I've heard others pulling up comparisons to *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and I can see the obvious influence of both - a boarding school for magicians and doorways to a secret world - but *The Magicians* lacks the magical spark of either.

In fact, it only barely feels like a fantasy novel, reminding me more of **Tartt's *The Secret History* with a touch of magic** (something that may or may not sound appealing). Actually, that description fits so right that I wonder if I stole it from someone else... Anyway, this is about a bunch of smart beyond belief characters who walk around being self-obsessed and annoying.

"Are you smart?"

There was no non-embarrassing answer to this.

"I guess."

"Don't worry about it, everybody here is. If they even brought you in for the Exam you were the smartest person in your school, teachers included."

It feels like it's **about pretentious people being pretentious**. Don't get me wrong, I like smart characters. I like unlikable characters, even. Characters who do stupid things for stupid reasons can quickly irk me, as can self-sacrificing heroes who fail to show that people are complex, difficult and selfish at times.

But I enjoy it when characters actually show me intellectual acuity and emotional maturity. I'm not so

convinced when page one introduces us to our characters who are pretty much the best at everything, have crazy GPAs, wealthy families, secure futures and still manage to feel so damn sorry for themselves. Let's all quote Milton and celebrate the misery of our perfect lives!

In the TV show, the characters are not quite so annoying. Their intellect is quirky and charming, and their dissatisfaction with life more convincing. And - maybe because it is the nature of a TV show - it was nice to actually be **shown** something, rather than simply **told** it.

The book is so self aware. So very sure of its own superiority as a "literary" version of a magic school. I feel like we're rarely shown anything, just constantly told by the author how special Fillory is and how sophisticated the characters are. We are told that Quentin's intellect is virtually beyond compare, and yet he's a blubbing idiot for a lot of the novel (plus childish and lacking in any growth).

Truth be told - **it's boring**. I'm not sure how it's possible to make a story that borrows so heavily from two of the most exciting series out there into something this tedious, but here you are! An emotionally-detached third-person narrative that *instructs* us in the story and characters, instead of ever weaving a compelling tale.

I'll stick to the TV show.

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[Name Redacted] says

A friend gave this book to me as a Christmas present, but the sneering reviews (on and inside the book) which compared it (oh-so-favorably) to Harry Potter/Narnia/LotR (proclaiming them "weak" and this strong and bracing and refreshing and...) kept repulsing me before I could even get to the first page. She's coming to visit me next month however and I'm determined to read it! Updates to follow!

UPDATE 4: A miserable book about miserable people being miserable while doing miserable things written by, I suspect, a very miserable man. I was also disappointed, but amused, to learn how much of the novel (especially the identity of the "big bad" and the fate of an oft-mentioned ancillary character) I was able to predict ahead of time, and the dialogue in the final great confrontation felt absurdly hackneyed -- especially coming from an author desperately trying to establish a narrative and style contrary to the genre he's trying to satirize/criticize/mock. You know whose story would have been far more interesting and engaging and subversive? MARTIN CHATWIN. You know whose story was a tiresome exercise in sneering banality? QUENTIN COLDWATER.

UPDATE 3: This is a quick, easy read -- i think that has a lot to do with Grossman's "tell-don't-show" approach to writing, and the psuedo-serialized format. The characters are pretty flat, just broad generalizations (fat guy, uptight girl, mopey protagonist, smart love-interest, mohawk guy, Russian teacher, hot young teacher, etc.) and the dialog actually feels LESS realistic and MORE awkward for all the modern-day slang and profanity that's shoehorned in. The sex scenes are vague descriptions, and for that I have to admire Grossman's restraint -- after all, he's trying very hard to write for "adults".

UPDATE 2: I think I've finally realized what this actually reminds me of. It's like a pale imitation of the graphic novel mini-series The Books of Magic by Neil Gaiman (and its subsequent, lesser follow-up serieses

"The Books of Magic", "The Names of Magic" and "The Age of Magic".) It seems to draw a lot from "The Books of Magic" actually, complete with an immature (emotionally, psychologically, intellectually and physically) wizard slowly using his power to indulge his every base instinct and whim and losing touch with humanity. Sadly, there's no great sense of loss here, only a slow realization that the protagonist is as tiresome at the end as he was at the beginning.

UPDATE 1: I found this line from a GoodReads review of the book and it seems to sum up what I'm feeling and what most non-hipsters felt about it: "This is a cold and sterile book for people who think themselves too sophisticated for genre fiction, a sub-section of the reading public that, I suspect, includes the author."

Grossman is a "teller" not a "shower" and as a result he's really not much of a writer. The only parts I've actually found compelling have been the brief descriptions of the natural world in Upstate New York, and that's only because I grew up there and remember the place quite clearly; I am substituting my memories for the artistry Grossman lacks. So far every character has been unpleasant and unsympathetic, no-one is really happy or even capable of feeling content, and magic is empty and apparently incapable of anything truly special. How very much like every "profound" novel written these days! Maybe this will appeal more to fans of Jonathan Franzen and Michael Chabon? It will certainly appeal to those readers who mistake misery and depression and nihilism for depth and insight and realism. Is the message that magic cannot make you happy, because it is merely a tool and as such simply reflects the inner character of the user? That could have been conveyed without hitting the reader quite so hard over the head with how utterly miserable everyone and everything is. Part of the problem with "The Magicians" is that the author clearly sees the subject matter as far beneath him, like the "Fillory" books which Quentin loves but others dismiss as childish and through which Grossman conveys his utter contempt for Lewis, Tolkien, Rowling, etc. and their fans; it is as though Grossman and his hipster readers are outside looking in and sharing smirking, adolescent jibes directed at the people having genuine fun inside. After all, they're too COOL to join the party. I hope things improve, but it's not much hope.

Khanh, first of her name, mother of bunnies says

If you will, for just one second, look at your life and see how perfect it is. Stop looking for the next secret door that is going to lead you to your real life. Stop waiting. This is it: there's nothing else. It's here, and you'd better decide to enjoy it or you're going to be miserable wherever you go, for the rest of your life, forever."

"You can't just decide to be happy."

"No, you can't. But you can sure as hell decide to be miserable. Is that what you want? Do you want to be the asshole who went to Fillory and was miserable there? Even in Fillory? Because that's who you are right now."

Brakebills is like **Harry Potter for assholes**, and to that, I say bravo because that's a fucking fantastic thing. Yes, Harry Potter was a pretty dark series by its end, but it started as a children's tale. The characters are admirable. Brave. Courageous. They are imperfect, but they're often models, paragons. Real life isn't like that. Real people are jerks, and, let's admit it, we'll do anything to get ahead. We lie. We cheat. We steal. This is the American dream, and this is what the (American) characters in this book represent. The main character in this book is a **depressed, over-analytical little shit** and that's just fine, because **I'm a glass-half-empty kind of person, and he resonates with me.**

Are the main characters in this book nice people? Fuck no. Maybe that's why I like them. I'm an asshole. Let me clarify that. I'm not deliberately mean. I am not a jerk, but "asshole" to me, means you do what it takes to get ahead in life. It's all good to be meek, to be gentle. It's fine, but it's not going to get you anywhere in life. Studies have shown that leaders are, in fact, people who are jerks. Sure, you can be charming, charismatic, but everyone needs a little assholery in their life, however well-concealed.

If you're content with normalcy and a quiet, calm life without stress? Great! Good for you. I admire you, and I say that with neither condescension nor sarcasm. But a nice, quiet life where one doesn't want to get ahead, where one doesn't feel the need to stand up for one's self is not for everyone. It's not for me. I need stress in my life. I need power. And that, my friend, is why I like the characters in this book. They're assholes, they're not perfect, they're stupid at times, they're more Slytherin than Gryffindor, and **they're the symbol of 'Murica, y'all**. This ain't your British boarding school.

The main character in this book is a brilliant kid who stumbles (literally) into the Magical school of Brakebills. There is no magical legacy here. There are no magical families. Brakebills is effort only, talent only. Either you got magical powers or you're just a Muggle. Quentin passes the magical test (not ever having known that such a magical world existed), and is admitted into the school. Harry Potter jumped at the thought of entry into Hogwarts. Quentin: **not so much**.

Suppose it really was a school for magic. Was it any good? What if he'd stumbled into some third-tier magic college by accident? He had to think practically. He didn't want to be committing himself to some community college of sorcery when he could have Magic Harvard or whatever.

Skepticism! Yeah!

The characters in this book do not come from all walks of life. They're the best of the best. The crème de la crème. Throw them all together and you've got the equivalent of a bunch of pre-med students killing each other to get 0.1% higher in class. **Quentin is fucking brilliant, the best in his school in the normal world. It's not going to matter here.**

"Are you smart?"

There was no non-embarrassing answer to this.

"I guess."

"Don't worry about it, everybody here is. If they even brought you in for the Exam you were the smartest person in your school, teachers included. Everyone here was the cleverest little monkey in his or her particular tree. Except now we're all in one tree together. It can be a shock. Not enough coconuts to go round. You'll be dealing with your equals for the first time in your life, and your betters. You won't like it."

There's no Harry and Ron and Hermione here. There is friendship, yes, but there's always a spirit of competition here, because they're all the best striving to be the best among the best.

They were quiet and intense, always eyeing each other assessingly, as if they were trying to figure out who—if it came right down to it—would take out who in an intellectual death match. They didn't congregate overmuch—they were always civil but rarely warm. They were used to competing and used to winning. In other words, they were like Quentin, and Quentin wasn't

used to being around people like himself.

There's not much playing, a lot of studying. Friendship does not come easily. Harry met Ron and bonded on the Hogwarts Express. It's a much bumpier road to friendship here.

"Listen to me carefully," Fogg was saying. "Most people are blind to magic. They move through a blank and empty world. They're bored with their lives, and there's nothing they can do about it. They're eaten alive by longing, and they're dead before they die."

"But you live in the magical world, and it's a great gift. And if you want to get killed here, you'll find plenty of opportunities without killing each other."

The magical system in this book is mechanical, methodical. There are no muttered phrases, no cute names for spells. Instead of a visible villain like Voldemort, the evil, the terror in this book are much less visible, but by no means less effective. I've rarely read a phrase in a book that has more accurately described a feeling of a panic attack.

There was something odd about the man's appearance—Quentin couldn't seem to make out his face. For a second he couldn't figure out why, and then he realized it was because there was a small leafy branch in front of it that partially obscured his features. The branch came from nowhere. It was attached to nothing. It just hung there in front of the man's face.

Then Professor March stopped speaking and froze in place.

Alice had stopped, too. The room was silent. A chair creaked. Quentin couldn't move either. There was nothing restraining him, but the line between his brain and his body had been cut.

He circled Professor March. There was something strange about the way he moved, something too fluid about his gait. When he walked into the light, Quentin saw that he wasn't quite human, or if he had been once he wasn't anymore. Below the cuffs of his white shirt his hands had three or four too many fingers.

Fifteen minutes crawled by, then half an hour. Quentin couldn't turn his head, and the man moved in and out of his field of view. He puttered with Professor March's equipment. He toured the auditorium. He took out a knife and pared his fingernails. Objects stirred and shifted restlessly in place whenever he walked too near them. He picked up an iron rod from March's demonstration table and bent it like a piece of licorice.

Quentin's fear came and went and came back in huge sweating rushes, crashing waves. He was sure something very bad was happening, it just wasn't clear yet exactly what.

I know there are a lot of people who hated this book. 3.6 is a pretty crap rating for a book of this popularity, but I loved it, and here's why. The main character is smart, he wants to get ahead, he is pessimistic, he is a skeptic. **Why is this a bad thing?** What's wrong with looking at everything through

The world is not all rainbows and roses. We need people who see the glass as half-empty. Fantasy is great, I absolutely love Harry Potter, but there's always too much of a good thing. **Main characters do not always have to be admirable. Anti-heroes are awesome, too.** Selfishness, narcissism, misanthropy: these are not necessarily negative traits because they make a character human. Are you perfect? I know I'm not. I know I have my dark moments. I know that **I hate people 97% of the time because humans are dumb.** It's not

wrong to want to get ahead in life. It's not wrong to want to be the best.

The world is not a magical place. It is filled with corruption and people who will step on you if given the chance. Survival of the fittest means you have to be a jerk at times; you have to stand up for yourself.

That is why I like this book. It is dark, it is pessimistic, it views fantasy and magic in a more methodical, more sensible manner. **It is realistic.** If you want your rainbows and magical lions that talk, go back to Narnia. I'll take my Brakebills.

D. Pow says

This book has been hard-pedaled as an adult Harry Potter and it is-but with a soulless little git like Draco Malfoy as the main protagonist. Grossman doesn't get to the genuine transformative joy possible in books about other worlds and magic, the metaphorical kick one can bring to the reader. This is a cold and sterile book for people who think themselves too sophisticated for genre fiction, a sub-section of the reading public that, I suspect, includes the author.

To be fair there are certain things Grossman does well. There are isolated set-pieces of violence and magical ritual gone wrong, that are thrilling, scary and visceral. He also is very clever at conveying the huge rush of empowerment a disenfranchised teen would feel when uncovering then honing magical powers. The old riff of a nobody becoming somebody is done well here, even though it's crouched in dry, clinical and mechanistic terms that undermine its effectiveness.

And that's the rub here. For every scene of terror and beauty, there are two that are clumsy and lame. Grossman presents certain key plot elements so obtusely that they hit like a feather instead of a hammer. He condenses action at the wrong times, has pivotal stuff occur off-stage as it were and just doesn't deliver from page to page either on the commercial fiction scale or one grander.

Traditional Fantasy Novels power(as well as their stodgy childishness) lie to a degree in their pedagogical function. They are to an extent primers for young people on how to behave, how to become a more effective human being, how to be brave in the face of adversity and to learn to be selfless on occasion even though ones adolescent genes(and jeans) are screaming for pure selfish, solipsistic, *I am* the center of the universe, expression.

So there is a journey up Mount Doom by sad, wounded Frodo and stout, brave Sam. And Harry Potter puts his nuts on the line over and over against that nose-less wonder, Voldemort, secure in the knowledge that Ron and Hermione always have his back. They are, in the course of their journeys, becoming braver and stronger and less rooted in their myopic view of things. In Grossman's novel, the protagonist starts out as a selfish turd, segue ways to more selfish turdism, and then does a sideways double back flip into being (you guessed it) a selfish turd. This is refreshing to an extent-how like real life it is-people seldom change unless confronted by trauma or some extreme events. But in Grossman's hands it is just one more nail in the coffin, taking an eminently worthwhile premise(adult Harry Potter, twisted Narnia) and magically transforming it through bad craft into utter shit.
