



## The Humming Room

*Ellen Potter*

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## **The Humming Room** Ellen Potter

Hiding is Roo Fanshaw's special skill. Living in a frighteningly unstable family, she often needs to disappear at a moment's notice. When her parents are murdered, it's her special hiding place under the trailer that saves her life.

As it turns out, Roo, much to her surprise, has a wealthy if eccentric uncle, who has agreed to take her into his home on Cough Rock Island. Once a tuberculosis sanitarium for children of the rich, the strange house is teeming with ghost stories and secrets. Roo doesn't believe in ghosts or fairy stories, but what are those eerie noises she keeps hearing? And who is that strange wild boy who lives on the river? People are lying to her, and Roo becomes determined to find the truth.

Despite the best efforts of her uncle's assistants, Roo discovers the house's hidden room--a garden with a tragic secret.

Inspired by *The Secret Garden*, this tale full of unusual characters and mysterious secrets is a story that only Ellen Potter could write.

## **The Humming Room Details**

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Author : Ellen Potter

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## From Reader Review The Humming Room for online ebook

### Amy Eye says

Roo starts the book off pretty rough. Well, it started way before we came in on the story, but we find that out as we go along. Her father and his girlfriend were killed, leaving Roo all alone. Not that things were all that great before, she was never dressed properly, never fed well, and she preferred the company of dirt over people. Her knack of hiding comes in handy when her uncle takes custody of her. Not only does she find some amazing new hiding spots, but she learns a little more about life itself.

The story was cute. Never having read *The Secret Garden*, I wasn't sure what I was in for. While you could definitely tell there was a beginning, middle and end, the middle seemed to fly through so many of the experiences too quickly, and the ending was wrapped up too nicely and abruptly. This story really could have benefited from some extra detail in the building of relationships, the development of Roos character and some explanations on some things. (possible spoilers ahead)

Roo's eyes go from a dull green to a bright green in the middle - that was pretty much all that was said about it. I think it would have been nice to see more explanation on this - talk about why they did this. Discuss her relationship with the earth more. Give us details that will make us fall in love with the characters. The same goes for Jack - he is this incredible being - and we don't know much about him at all. Phillips angst was played down to some temper tantrums. And the budding relationship between Jack and Roo was desperately lacking what it needed to be more than merely nice.

The vocabulary in this books leads me to believe it was written for 10- and 12-year-old readers. I think an extra hundred pages filling in these extra parts would have been great for readers of that age and give them a more fulfilling reading experience. More background on the family; more mystery to the old hospital; more overall emotion.

I do love Ellen Potter's writing, but this book for me fell short of what I would look for in a book that I would want to read again and again.

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### Misty says

4.5.

I guess I should start by telling you how much I love the classics - how I was this weird little girl who read *Oliver Twist* like 45 times, or got more excited about the box of illustrated classics I got for Christmas when I was 9 than I was for the toys (in fact, I remember none of the toys, but still have most of the books). And I should probably tell you about how much I adore Francis Hodgson Burnett, and have read *The Secret Garden* more times than should be mentioned in polite society.

I should tell you this so that you understand the equal parts excitement and trepidation I feel when someone says they are rewriting a classic, especially one so beloved. There's always the chance that it's going to be a giant fail, and that I will be stuck with forever associating it with a favorite book of mine. But thank you, grilled cheesus, this was not even a *little* bit fail. Ellen Potter really managed to capture the things I loved about *The Secret Garden* but still make them her own, which is no easy feat. She managed to capture the atmosphere of *TSG*, which is impressive because we live in a much less isolated world now. But for all that,

people still *feel* isolated, which is one of the keys of the story. Potter captures both senses of isolation, the actual *physical* isolation and the way people close themselves off, and she worked them together beautifully.

Potter also captures the tone of the original. There's a dreaminess that I think a lot of children's books fail to capture, but that Burnett and Potter have. It makes me wistful, makes me miss being a kid, exploring and lounging in the hazy days of summer. Reading these books is almost like a memory - something is triggered and you can almost *feel* it again. And there's a longing that comes with that, a sort of knowledge that it can't go on forever, so it's bittersweet. Potter weaved this atmosphere, this feeling, throughout the book, and it made me connect to it in the way that I absolutely love, and that all children's books should strive for. It was a lovely reading experience because of it.

But what's most impressive is that she captured the *heart* of the book. I really, really liked Roo's blossoming. OMG that was a horrible pun. But I'm leaving it because it's totally true, and is an element that was carried over nicely from *The Secret Garden*. The whole story at its core is really about blossoming, about growth. About making connections to something outside of yourself, sending out your roots and flourishing. This is true of the garden and the characters (metaphors!!! \*jazz hands\*), and is part of what makes the story so charming and so relatable. Potter captures that growth and that sort of awakening really well.

Roo was charmingly dysfunctional. And just charming in general. As were most of the side characters. I think some of the negative aspects of personalities from the original were removed or sort of shifted. There wasn't really much of a mean schoolmarmy thing going on, or as much of a petulant, sick child. It was there, just a little milder. Roo was much more likable early on than Mary was. I think because you can immediately see how much she is hurting, whereas Mary just seems spoiled. There is still a tinge of darkness to the story, but I think it's a more understandable darkness for a modern audience, and it never intrudes to the point of making a character unlikable.

My one drawback was that it ended a little too abruptly for me. Well, maybe not abruptly, but the end was lacking a little of the finesse that had made it so lovely. It's such a short book, so when a short book that is well developed throughout suddenly lets off at the end, it always makes me feel a little cheated. I can't help thinking in such instances, You weren't running out of room - it's a short book! Add a little, finish it out nicely for me. I hate loving and loving and loving something, only to end it saying "Oh..." [This is not to say it's a bad ending, necessarily, or that the book is any less worth reading. Just that - it didn't match up, and it left me a teeny bit disappointed.]

But that being said, it is a highly enjoyable story for those who have read *The Secret Garden*, and for those who haven't, as well as for middle grade and adult readers alike.

Plus, there's the Faigne. Worth reading, if only for that...

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### **Jessika says**

This book was seriously difficult for me to rate. I have gone back and forth between 3 & 4 stars...it really makes me wish for those illusive half stars. Anyway, I digress.

The Humming Room is truly an excellent take on a retelling of *The Secret Garden*, which I haven't read since I was a child. Although I haven't read it in so long, I absolutely recognized the general feel & ambiance of the classic tale. Ellen Potter captured it perfectly. And I really do appreciate what she has done for young

readers with this book. She took a classic tale & updated it, making it more accessible for young readers. I won't go so far as to say they should read this in lieu of the original, but I think it will encourage them to "tackle" the classic, if you will.

Where this book really shined for me was in Ellen Potter's gorgeous writing and in particular, in Roo's character. There were certain passages describing the island or the garden that were just so beautiful & atmospheric that I was just transported there as I read. This is definitely a must-read for nature lovers, and this is especially evident with Roo's character. I really loved Roo, and even though I didn't find her growth as drastic as I had hoped, I still found her story to be sweet & redemptive...not to mention, I adored her love of nature.

I guess where this fell to 3 stars for me is that it felt too short. For one, I felt like the ending was too abrupt. Also, the plot as a whole felt sort of rushed, and there were a good amount of things left unexplained. Plus, there were a couple side characters who I felt were just kind of thrown into the story. A few were mentioned almost in passing, and I wish we would have seen more of them. There was one in particular who, even though he was definitely prevalent in the second half of the story, I just felt like we never got to really understand his purpose. (I don't want to mention names for fear of spoilers.) Granted, this all could be due to the fact that I read this as an adult. However, I think my feeling of disconnect could have been solved with just an extra 50 pages.

Again, I will say that as a whole, I thought this was an excellent rendition of *The Secret Garden* and a worthwhile read for young readers. There were a few things that kept me from loving this one, but I think kids would really be able to use this book as a spring board to expand their literary horizons.

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### **Heather says**

Before picking up the book, I had no idea that it was closely based on *The Secret Garden*. I just knew Ellen Potter wrote it, and I think she's an excellent writer. Honestly, if the inside cover hadn't mentioned *The Secret Garden*, I still wouldn't have known for a while, because it was not immediately obvious. (Once it becomes obvious, though, it is **quite** obvious.) I know some readers haven't liked how closely it mirrors the original story, but I thought the characters and setting were unique enough for the book to stand alone. And I really enjoyed reading it. I kept feeling like Ms. Potter was going to introduce something magical or fantastic, but any magic was fully believable and not really classified as magic. More like mysteries of life. This book made me want to go reread *The Secret Garden* right away, which I think makes it a rather fitting tribute to an excellent book. Those unfamiliar with Burnett's work should find it enjoyable on its own, while *Secret Garden* fans will probably enjoy seeing how various story elements parallel the original.

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### **April says**

Oh friends, I love reading books that just fuel my love of the middle grade category. *The Humming Room* by Ellen Potter is a very small book. Your eye might not even see it on the shelf – which is quite unfortunate. I've not seen much fanfare for *The Humming Room* which is a shame, because it's a quiet, beautifully written take on *The Secret Garden*.

Read the rest of my review [here](#).

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### **Nafiza says**

Potter narrates *The Humming Room* with a finesse and a skill that makes reading the novel a true (serious) pleasure. Roo Fanshaw is an amazing protagonist. She is half wild, existing in a world that measures space and how she can use it to conceal herself. Her world is entirely different from the world that adults exist in and I love how Potter doesn't spell out Roo's early home life to the reader and instead hints at it in a way that older readers will catch it while the younger readers may not be able to. This is what makes *The Humming Room* such a multi-faceted novel that will work for a person no matter what their age.

I didn't know it was a retelling of *The Secret Garden* and to be honest, I didn't think there was much emphasis given to the garden as was given to the fledgling relationship between the cousins. It was truly refreshing to read Roo's metamorphosis, for lack of a better, from the scared half-wild child she was into the still, eccentric, but someone a bit calmer, a lot happier. Also, the real wild child, the boy who may or may not be real, the boy who is legend, he is also one of the most interesting characters I have recently come across in a novel.

I love the hint of a romance between Roo and this boy. It's just a whisper really, just the subtlest hint and I think that is what makes it even more awesome. The little cousin's floundering, his sickness, the ominous doctor, all these separately come together to create a novel that is immensely entertaining and that lets you have a glimpse of the magical world of childhood that many of us have unwillingly left behind. The only problem I had with this novel was how abruptly it ended. I wasn't ready for it to end, I thought there was a lot more to be told and that Roo had a lot more story in her but alas.

Do I recommend this? Hell yeah. I think you should all pick yourselves up a copy as soon as you possibly can.

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### **Lizzy says**

Most people assume that being strong or tough is the skill that will protect you and save you, help you survive when you're in a dangerous situation, but Roo Fanshaw sees it differently. Her special skill is hiding, being able to disappear at a moment's notice. Roo has spent most of her life hiding, finding the smallest spaces to curl herself into. It is in these small spaces that she feels able to breathe freely; in fact, open spaces make her feel enclosed, as if she can't breath. It is Roo's hiding skill that saves her life when her parents are murdered in the trailer where they lived. Roo was hiding underneath it, close to the earth. Roo feels she has a quiet connection to the earth and the life that dwells in it. She puts her ear close to the ground and she can hear, actually hear, the sound of life teeming beneath it –a kind of humming sound. Though she loves the quiet reflection of small safe places, Roo's life doesn't stay quiet for long. After her parents die, a long-lost eccentric uncle agrees to take her in. She moves to his mansion on Cough Rock Island, a mansion that was once a hospital for children sick with tuberculosis, full of secrets and ghosts. Roo doesn't believe in ghost stories, but there are strange noises coming from the forbidden east wing of the house, and the locals are full of superstitious stories of the river and the mansion. But the river, the mansion, and life on the islands have their own story to tell. Since she came to Cough Rock, Roo is full of questions. Who gave her uncle those bloodied scratches across his face? What is that strange humming sound Roo hears through the wall? Who is that wild boy canoeing up and down the river? Roo is determined to come out of her hiding space (both

physically and mentally) and learn the truth about the house and her family. Though everyone in the house tries to keep her away, Roo discovers a secret garden hidden in the center of the mansion, a garden locked away because it holds a tragic secret. This story is inspired by the classic "The Secret Garden." Though elements of the story unfold in a familiar way, the characters that Potter creates are quirky and likable. Roo is strong and feisty. The author has done an excellent job of giving readers a different angle on a familiar story. Reading *The Humming Room* may even inspire you to take a favorite classic tale, write what it would be like in a different time, with different characters, and see how the story unfolds.

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### **Alessandra says**

I am disappointed with this book.

On the one hand, it's a not bad story of Roo Fanshaw, an orphaned girl taken in by her uncle, who discovers new friends and brings a neglected garden back to life.

On the other hand, it's a complete retread of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, almost scene for scene and character for character.

The author says outright this book was "inspired" by Burnett's classic. That's probably a good thing, because otherwise she would probably be at the center of a firestorm for, if not plagiarism, out and out theft of the entire story.

How close is it?

(Major, major, major spoiler alerts)

(view spoiler)

There are original elements, most notably a hint of possible supernatural involvement (which does not, in my opinion, improve the story), and an overbearing tutor.

I wonder about some things. In the original story there is an army of offstage servants taking care of the house. In *The Humming Room* it's only Roo, Ms. Valentine, Violet, and sometimes Roo's tutor on the entire island in the great sanatorium. Who keeps the place clean? Who cooks?

The environment of the Saint Lawrence River islands sounds magnificent, it's true.

*The Humming Room* is told faster than the original book. Even in *The Secret Garden*, the ending feels rushed and a bit contrived. This book is shorter than its model, and a lot happens without explanation. Roo is a thief at the beginning of the book, then decides to stop being one. Doctor Oulette is onscreen for a single brief scene and says almost nothing, then later causes an intense but brief crisis while still offstage. A piece of jungle folklore is introduced early to be used as a deus ex machina later -- how and why it works is never explained.

I can see why some people would like a modern, simpler, easier-to-read retread of *The Secret Garden*. But it seems to me that this version is too slavish an imitation, simply a modern skin put over a story that was already written, and written well, a hundred years ago.

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## TheBookSmugglers says

First Impressions:

Ana: Sometimes my book-reading decisions are very easy to make: I wanted to read *The Humming Room* on the strengths of its cover alone. I knew nothing of it when I started reading it and didn't realise it was a retelling of *The Secret Garden* (haven't read that book) until I was done and read the blurb. I read the book without any expectations whatsoever and even though I have a few reservations, I really enjoyed this story.

Thea: I, too, was immediately struck by the lovely cover for *The Humming Room*, but also was motivated to read the book because of the praise I've heard for Ellen Potter's previous novel, *The Kneebone Boy* (which, incidentally, also has a gorgeous cover). I was thrilled to discover that the book was actually a retelling of *The Secret Garden* (which I haven't read since I was a child), and found myself caught up in Ms. Potter's lush writing style and enamored with heroine, Roo. I truly enjoyed this book, although it felt a little abrupt and I can't help but think there should have been more to the story – but overall found *The Humming Room* to be a sweet, lilting read.

On the Plot:

Ana: The first thing that needs to be said is: I haven't read *The Secret Garden* so I can't say first-hand how much of *The Humming Room* is a close homage/retelling and how it might deviate from the original (or not). I do believe that being unencumbered by expectations or by previous knowledge of this story proved to be a blessing in this case (I mention this because earlier this week I reviewed *Gil Marsh* which was also a retelling and which I approached with great expectations).

With that caveat out of the way, *The Humming Room* was an enjoyable, if uneven, read. Its first half is definitely its strongest: it is beautifully written and we get a good sense of the main character and her

developing arc (more on that later). This story has been transported to modern times but there is a certain timeless feel to it which comes from the setting – an old mansion on an isolated island. It is evocative of old-fashioned stories and I loved it because of that. I also appreciated the subtle narrative that hints at mysteries, ghost stories and even tales of fairies.

However, the second half is distinctively different. In the first half things were developed slowly, by introducing the main character Roo and the mysteries surrounding the house, the island and its inhabitants with gentleness and care. But once a secondary character is introduced and the mysteries revealed, the story is rushed up, leading to an extremely abrupt and undeveloped climax that left several things unexplained and unresolved – at least for me. Despite this unevenness, I am still glad that I have read *The Humming Room*.

Thea: It has been a very long time since I have read *The Secret Garden* (or since I have watched any of the many film adaptations – my favorite being the one with Maggie Smith), and my memory of the story is a little fuzzy – I remember the highlights (the broken family, the supposedly crippled son and stand-offish father, and for some reason I remember that maid Martha had a cockney accent), but I went into *The Humming Room* with no real expectations or demands. Happily, I found myself easily slipping into this more modern re-imagining of *The Secret Garden* without any trouble. Instead of following a young girl whose parents died of a cholera outbreak in British colonized India, *The Humming Room* takes a young girl named Roo from her trailer park home after her drug dealing father dies to live on a strange isolated island called Cough Rock in her uncle's mansion. The story runs fairly parallel to the original source material – the orphaned girl moves to a secluded home only to stumble on a family saga, and of course, a literal and metaphorical secret garden that will blossom once again with care and time.

From a storytelling perspective, I love Ellen Potter's sense of atmosphere and backdrop – one of my favorite parts of *The Humming Room* is the setting of Cough Rock, the history behind the name (the mansion used to be a Children's Hospital for those suffering from Tuberculosis), and the gothic, ghostly touch to the story. I loved the feel of the island, the river that surrounds it, and the folklore of the Faigne and the Yellow Girl.

That said, I do have to agree with Ana in that while the style and setting to *The Humming Room* is beautiful in the first portion of the novel, something is lost by the second half, and the ending to me felt rushed and incomplete. I also remain unconvinced of the “magical”/fantasy aspects of the novel...but perhaps that's just my own personal taste.

On the Characters:

Ana: Roo is a wonderful strong-willed protagonist and I thought her story arc was beautifully done and it showed character growth. The transition from a malnourished, lonely, stand-offish child to a blossoming young girl was my favourite aspect of the novel. I loved the small details of how Roo interacted with others and with the world around her – her hiding places, her talking to animals and her connection with the natural world.

Unfortunately, the secondary characters are not developed much beyond their initial introductions and this is especially true about the villains of the piece are so underdeveloped (they shows up, they do villainy things, they leave never to come back) as to be completely pointless.

Thea: I \*LOVED\* Roo as our heroine – she's quiet and thoughtful and, as one character describes her, she takes in everything the world has to offer and makes herself hard like a steel beam. She watches, she listens, and she learns; I had no problems believing in this twelve year old protagonist and her own unique way of seeing and reacting to people around her.

I'm a little hesitant to name any other characters, because to do so might spoil folks that are unfamiliar with The Secret Garden, so I'll try to be sufficiently vague here: The characters from The Secret Garden are all in The Humming Room, following the same types of arcs and characterizations as those upon whom they are based.

Again, the only disappointing thing to me was how rushed the book felt by its climactic scenes, and how I could quite buy into the fantasy-ish elements of the story (in particular, one fantasy-ish character).

Final Thoughts, Observations & Rating::

Ana: Despite its unevenness, I truly enjoyed The Humming Room and it made me really want to read The Secret Garden and see how it compares.

Thea: I agree that the book is uneven, yet I still thoroughly enjoyed reading The Humming Room. Ellen Potter's beautiful sense of imagery, setting, and her loving care for description and language completely won me over. I'll certainly be reading more from this author in the future.

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### **Shaun says**

The writing was superb, but unfortunately the story was too similar to the original story, *The Secret Garden*. What started off as a fresh tale with quirky characters turned into a predictable and, at times, disappointing rehash of the great classic.

I understand the author's intent was to retell the original story, but felt she needed to claim it as her own. Early in the book there was the suggestion of an other-worldly force at work, which seemed capable of giving this story a new twist. Unfortunately this element was not developed. In that respect, I thoroughly enjoyed the first half, but not so much the second half where, for me, the story converges much too closely to the original.

Not sure I would recommend this to a young reader over the original, nor do I think young readers would enjoy as much after reading the original. Still, if you or your child have no intention of reading the early twentieth century work of Frances Hodgson Burnett, Potter's updated interpretation is well written by an author who obviously has a skill for creating interesting characters.

I will add that I ordered the *The Kneebone Boy* after reading this book because I was so impressed with the author, even if I found this story lacking.

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### **Gizelle says**

The humming room by Ellen potter is a mystery about this girl named Roo who just lost her parents and has to live on this island with her uncle and this spoiled brat and uncovers something big that might just change things.

The reason I love this book is because of the girls personality and how she seems fierce and ready to take on anything. Also how the book leads with these adventures and the room the secret of the hidden room was

shocking about what happened in their before she uncovered it

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### **Wendy says**

Almost four stars. I like Potter's writing and characters. This one didn't feel as risky (or as meaningful) as *The Kneebone Boy* (and now I can hear Peter Sieruta's voice in my head, saying "well, maybe I'll actually like this one, then; it's an intriguing premise, an updated version of *The Secret Garden*"). I loved the *Secret Garden* parallels in the first few chapters--the hiding, the being transported away to her uncle's place by the housekeeper/personal assistant--but rather wished that things had moved in separate directions from there. I didn't think the rest of it worked as well. In particular, there was an otherworldly/unreal quality to the dead mother's story that didn't seem to fit with the stark reality of Roo's life. I wasn't sure if that was intended or if I just didn't believe it, but either way, I didn't think it worked that well. And I didn't think the Colin-parallel character worked very well. I loved the upstate New York river island setting, and the sanatorium, and the way I felt when she was going down the chute (and remembered what the chute was used for). A lot of good things in this book, but I don't think it's one of the best of the year.

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### **R.J. says**

I loved this book even more than I loved the classic it's based on, and I don't say that lightly. Everything that rubbed me the wrong way about *THE SECRET GARDEN* (especially the Disability Fail) is dealt with beautifully here, and Roo's tough background makes her personality utterly believable and maintains the reader's sympathies (though NOT their pity, because Roo is far too strong and dynamic a character to be pitied). I adored the supporting cast, Jack especially, and the way the author makes the setting come richly and vibrantly alive. For such a slim book there is a lot packed into these pages -- it's light, but never slight. Beautifully done, Ellen Potter.

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### **Eva says**

Excellent, if a bit less fleshed out than it could have been. I think the most beautiful part of *The Secret Garden*, the book this book is based on, is how slowly it takes everything - really letting you immerse yourself in the secret. This book felt like it could have been twice as long again without losing my interest.

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### **Jennifer says**

Hesitant about a rewrite of one of my favorite books, I was pleased to read the last page feeling that this book's connection to *The Secret Garden* actually enhanced the experience. Many of my students want to read that classic, but the language (including the Yorkshire dialect and accent of some characters) makes it inaccessible to most non-native speakers for several years. Abridged versions have their place, but aren't the best solution. [The Humming Room](#), however, has its own merits, distinct from its identity as a rewrite.

There are also two issues which this book is better able to address for 21st century sensibilities. First, the Dickon character's relationship with animals respects their wildness better; no herding a menagerie into

bedrooms here. Dickon may have been my first literary crush as a child, but I do prefer this updated attitude. Second, Potter has smoothed out the *deus ex machina* that abruptly brought about the resolution in Burnett's original. It was more common in children's books of the time to have a realistic story interrupted by one moment of "...and then magic happens," but modern readers expect greater consistency. Although the overall pacing of The Humming Room is a bit off - the exposition lags, and both the main action and denouement feel rushed - the resolution's nature is of a piece with the rest of the novel.

The most telling evidence of my opinion of The Humming Room? Potter's previous book, The Kneebone Boy, is now on my nightstand.

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