



Cuckoo Song

Frances Hardinge

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The first things to shift were the doll's eyes, the beautiful grey-green glass eyes. Slowly they swivelled, until their gaze was resting on Triss's face. Then the tiny mouth moved, opened to speak.

'What are you doing here?' It was uttered in tones of outrage and surprise, and in a voice as cold and musical as the clinking of cups. 'Who do you think you are? This is my family.'

When Triss wakes up after an accident, she knows that something is very wrong. She is insatiably hungry; her sister seems scared of her and her parents whisper behind closed doors. She looks through her diary to try to remember, but the pages have been ripped out.

Soon Triss discovers that what happened to her is more strange and terrible than she could ever have imagined, and that she is quite literally not herself. In a quest find the truth she must travel into the terrifying Underbelly of the city to meet a twisted architect who has dark designs on her family - before it's too late...

Cuckoo Song Details

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Author : Frances Hardinge

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From Reader Review Cuckoo Song for online ebook

Justine says

I am declaring this to be one of my favourite reads of 2015. I am a long time lover of Frances Hardinge's work, but this is my favourite book of hers. Cuckoo Song has all the things I expect from tale by Hardinge, specifically, fabulous use of language, unrestrained creativity, and just the right amount of darkness.

Also present are a trademark host of deeply complex and well developed characters, who, not content to sit still in their pigeon holes, shift and change our perceptions of them throughout the story. And what a multi-layered story it is! By turns dark family drama and frightening faerie tale mixed with dashes of excitement, humour, fear and love, it is by any measure, brilliant.

Bradley says

I was rather impressed with how much I could feel and relate for our heroine, but then I wonder if this is more a feature of good YA or just a feature of excellent writing.

In the end, I am forced to admit that my peer-pressuring buddies who twisted mine arms to read another YA title outside of my so-called comfort zone were all very right in their decision to do so. I feel as if I learned something very important in this book, even if I didn't discover anything new about myself or through the messages within the text. I *did*, however, think this would be a great book to introduce to my daughter once she gets to a certain age. The dark fantasy should appeal to any kid of any age, and the serious under and over-tones of both emotions and the intensity of the choices being made should make for a great tale to reread many times over, as children are wont to do.

And for those fans of Neil Gaiman, for either The Graveyard Book or Coraline, I think this one is a bit more accessible and readable. Yeah, I'm saying that, even though I'm a huge fan. I actually got into all of the characters in a way that's fairly uncommon for me. I usually fall back on plot or ideas or themes to carry the crest of the novels I read, and think it's a real lark and a surprise when a character is able to get under my skin and tear my stuffing out. (Not that I would go this far for this book, but the characterization was way above average.)

If I were a new reader, questioning or still questioning my identity, I might think this novel might rank as one of my absolute favourites of all time.

But since I feel like I can identify fine with all the bits and scraps that make up this poor girl's troubles, and since I saw through them and guessed at the end solution, sans "time", and because it harkened to all the old myths, it came across as truly beautiful example of wonderful writing, reintroducing a sense of wonder and fae in our world, I was more than merely pleased by the technique. I truly enjoyed it.

Plus, it was a delightful setup to be placed in 1920's England. I felt like I was living in a Twilight Zone episode of Downton Abbey with the idea-fantastic grace of The Anubis Gates, and the creepy ambiance of all the classic Stephen King horror, keeping us in the horrible now as dolls chitter at us.

Beyond all that, and beyond seeing what the character needed to become, I was quite surprised with a number of the magical scenes, so don't start assuming you'll guess everything in this novel, you horror fans. I'll definitely be reading more of Frances Hardinge.

(On a side note, I was absolutely convinced that the author was obese. All that HEAVY insistence on being HUNGRY all the time made me think of either an eating disorder or Audrey Two. So of course I checked out the GR page, and no, she isn't. She looks positively skinny. I scratched my head and wondered at the power of human imagination. The author is either POWERFULLY empathetic, or I'm a complete moron. Have fun with that, peeps. :)

Linda says

I'm really glad Justine made me read this one! :) This is a book I would have never thought to pick up, only because I don't read very much YA unless it's a series that *everyone* seems to be reading. This book has very imaginative descriptions that made for a dreamy-type setting to the story. The mystery slowly materialized into a "whoa!" moment of realization of what was really going on, and the remainder of the book was set at a perfect pace as I raced to the end to find out how it would all end. Very enjoyable!

Emily May says

*Something bad happened here, something that should never have taken place.
I've changed my mind. I don't want to remember.*

4 1/2 stars. Okay, **we need to talk about Frances Hardinge**. Despite seeing positive review after positive review, I have been putting her books off for years. Partly because they're supposed to be "middle grade" and partly because I couldn't really make sense of the blurbs - they sounded just... weird.

Well, Tatiana finally made me read *The Lie Tree*, which gave way to a weekend full of Hardinge madness. Because oh, her books *are* weird, but in the best possible creative, original way. Sometimes I guess "I have never read anything like this" is the best kind of compliment.

Cuckoo Song is best described as a **dark fairy tale**. The main characters are young and there is nothing unsuitable for children, and yet this is far from your typical middle grade book. It is inventive and clever. The story is full of metaphor, genuinely creepy scenes and an underlying tale about family and war.

It's like a paranormal historical horror mystery. And it is fantastic. The writing is gorgeous, full of lush but scary descriptions and the plot is so layered and thought-provoking. I would recommend this for children, teens and adults alike.

The story opens with Triss awakening after a mysterious accident. There are things she can't quite remember, and things that just don't seem right. Her sister refuses to believe she is really Triss. She begins to see and hear things that she shouldn't. And she is unable to quench her insatiable hunger.

As Triss "recovers", she discovers more about her life, her family, and its secrets. Soon, it's unclear whether

Triss is losing her mind or whether her accident triggered something horrific. It's a frightening supernatural tale on the surface, and a quiet, moving story about grief underneath.

Read it.

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Kelly says

This is the closest I've come to DNFing a book this year. Despite the fact that I liked the writing style, it did not take me long to realise that there was little else that I liked about this book.

I didn't care at all for a single character in this book. This sends huge alarm bells ringing in my head. Characters are so important for me and the fact that I could not care less about what happened to them was a huge negative for me. In fact, I could not help but be completely irritated by the use of 'Not-Triss' as a name for a good portion of this book, it did nothing to help me connect to the characters. I liked the initial premise behind the plot, but it very quickly spiralled into so many different sub-plots and things going on that I spent most of the book wondering what the hell was going to happen, but not in a good way. I'm not being funny but this 'girl' was eating beads, shoes(!), newspaper, all sorts of weird and wonderful items. Rather than feeling intrigued and mystified, I just felt that it was completely and utterly ridiculous. I just could not connect with this book at all, which is a shame. I've heard many great things about Frances Hardinge books and maybe one day I'll try another one.

There are so many positive reviews of this story and I just can't quite wrap my head around what it is that I am missing. Obviously just not the book for me!

Reading Corner says

2.5 stars

I wasn't a big fan of this book at all. It was completely different to what I expected, the story sounded so good, I thought I'd definitely love this one but I didn't. I found the story quite boring and I thought it was really dragged out with nothing that really fully engaged me in the story.

I found the main character Triss pretty annoying but Pen started to grow on me and I loved Violet. The story wasn't entertaining at all, I continually found myself zoning out for numerous pages so then I had to keep flicking back to understand what was going on. This book took me ages to read, nearly a month and I quickly began dreading picking it back up. There was a few nice twists in the story and a few interesting moments but that was it.

Brandi says

I don't read middle grade because I prefer more adult themes in my stories, but if this book is anything to go by I've been missing out. This was just superbly written, completely engrossing, and just **fantastic!**

"Mummy, help me, please help me, everything's strange and nothing's right, and my mind feels as if it's made up of pieces and some of them are missing..."

The story is about a family who, suffering from a terrible grief, make a deal with the devil- the Architect. As they try to nurse their ailing daughter back to health after an accident that left her *different*, things start to unravel, and no force of will can put things right again. Triss has no memory of what happened to her, but she knows there are pieces of her memory that are no longer there, and as she's convincing herself that she just needs time, she picks up her favorite childhood doll... and the doll starts screaming. Things go from bad to worse as Triss tries harder and harder to be the same girl she was before her accident, but when she learns the truth about what happened she knows she can never go back.

The relationships in this story are outstanding and watching these two sisters learn to be sisters instead of adversaries was touching. Pen is a prickly little thing, not at all content to conform to what her parents think she should be like, and I love her. She is fierce and brave, and totally believable in her youth, and along with the force that is Violet, I was totally at the mercy of these people and their tangled lives.

This story is really clean, but outstandingly creepy, and I'm completely entranced by the world that Hardinge created. I would not hesitate to let my nearly nine-year-old son read this, but be warned- it might be too scary for a younger kid.

The writing- oh my goodness, the writing is superb. There are deeper themes than just that of a girl trying to find herself: the effects of war on a societal level as well as personal; the depths of cruelty people can be capable of in the name of vengeance; autonomy; forgiveness; *love*. I'm not eloquent enough to say how amazing I think this book is and I can't recommend it highly enough!

Betsy says

I was watching the third *Hobbit* movie the other day (bear with me - I'm going somewhere with this) with no particular pleasure. There are few things in life more painful to a children's librarian than watching an enjoyable adventure for kids lengthened and turned into adult-centric fare, then sliced up into three sections. Still, it's always interesting to see how filmmakers wish to adapt material and as I sat there, only moderately stultified, the so-called "Battle of the Five Armies" (which, in this film, could be renamed "The Battle of the Thirteen Odd Armies, Give Or Take a Few) comes to a head as the glorious eagles swoop in. "They're the Americans", my husband noted. It took a minute for this to register. "What?" "They're the Americans. Tolkien wrote this book after WWI and the eagles are the Yanks that swoop in to save the day at the very last minute." I sat there thinking about it. England has always had far closer ties to The Great War than America, it's true. I remember sitting in school, baffled by the vague version I was fed. American children are taught primarily Revolutionary War, Civil War, and WWII fare. All other conflicts are of seemingly equal non-importance after those big three. Yet with the 100 year anniversary of the war to end all wars, the English, who had a much larger role to play, are, like Tolkien, still producing innovative, evocative, unbelievable takes that utilize fantasy to help us understand it. And few books do a better job of pinpointing the post traumatic stress syndrome of a post-WWI nation than Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song*. They will tell you

that it's a creepy doll book with changelings and fairies and things that go bump in the night. It is all of that. It is also one of the smartest dissections of what happens when a war is done and the survivors are left to put their lives back together. Some do a good job. Some do not.

Eleven-year-old Triss is not well. She knows this, but as with many illnesses she's having a hard time pinpointing what exactly is wrong. It probably had to do with the fact that she was fished out of the Grimmer, a body of water near the old stone house where her family likes to vacation. Still, that doesn't explain why her sister is suddenly acting angry and afraid of her. It doesn't explain why she's suddenly voracious, devouring plate after plate of food in a kind of half mad frenzy. And it doesn't explain some of the odder things that have been happening lately either. The dolls that don't just talk but scream too. The fact that she's waking up with dead leaves in her hair and bed. And that's all before her sister is nearly kidnapped by a movie screen, a tailor tries to burn her alive, and she discovers a world within her world where things are topsy turvy and she doesn't even know who she is anymore. Triss isn't the girl she once was. And time is running out.

From that description you'd be justified in wondering why I spent the better half of the opening paragraph of this review discussing WWI. After all, there is nothing particularly war-like in that summary. It would behoove me to mention then that all this takes place a year or two *after* the war. Triss's older brother died in the conflict, leaving his family to pick up the pieces. Like all parents, his are devastated by their loss. Unlike all parents, they make a terrible choice to keep him from leaving them entirely. It's the parents' grief and choices that then become the focal point of the book. The nation is experiencing a period of vast change. New buildings, new music, and new ideas are proliferating. Yet for Triss's parents, it is vastly important that nothing change. They're the people that would prefer to live in an intolerable but familiar situation rather than a tolerable unknown. Their love is a toxic thing, harming their children in the most insidious of ways. It takes an outsider to see this and to tell them what they are doing. By the end, it's entirely possible that they'll stay stuck until events force them otherwise. Then again, Hardinge leaves you with a glimmer of hope. The nation did heal. People did learn. And while there was another tragic war on the horizon, that was a problem for another day.

So what's all that have to do with fairies? In a smart twist Hardinge makes a nation bereaved become the perfect breeding ground for fairy (though she never calls them that) immigration. It's interesting to think long and hard about what it is that Hardinge is saying, precisely, about immigrants in England. Indeed, the book wrestles with the metaphor. These are creatures that have lost their homes thanks to the encroachment of humanity. Are they not entitled to lives of their own? Yet some of them do harm to the residents of the towns. But do all of them? Should we paint them all with the same brush if some of them are harmful? These are serious questions worth asking. Xenophobia comes in the form of the tailor Mr. Grace. His smooth sharp scissors cause Triss to equate him with the Scissor Man from the *Struwwelpeter* tales of old. Having suffered a personal loss at the hands of the otherworldly immigrants he dedicates himself to a kind of blind intolerance. He's sympathetic, but only up to a point.

Terms I Dislike: Urban Fairies. I don't particularly dislike the fairies themselves. Not if they're done well. I should clarify that the term "urban fairies" is used when discussing books in which fairies reside in urban environments. Gargoyles in the gutters. That sort of thing. And if we're going to get technical about it then yes, *Cuckoo Song* is an urban fairy book. The ultimate urban fairy book, really. Called "Besiders" their presence in cities is attributed to the fact that they are creatures that exist only where there is no certainty. In the past the sound of church bells proved painful, maybe fatal. However, in the years following The Great War the certainty of religion began to ebb from the English people. Religion didn't have the standing it once held in their lives/hearts/minds, and so thanks to this uncertainty the Besiders were able to move into places in the city made just for them. You could have long, interesting book group conversations about the true

implications of this vision.

There are two kinds of Frances Hardinge novels in this world. There are the ones that deal in familiar mythologies but give them a distinctive spin. That's this book. Then there are the books that make up their own mythologies and go into such vastly strange areas that it takes a leap of faith to follow, though it's worth it every time. That's books like *The Lost Conspiracy* or *Fly By Night* and its sequel. Previously Ms. Hardinge wrote *Well Witched* which was a lovely fantasy but felt tamed in some strange way. As if she was asked to reign in her love of the fabulous so as to create a more standard work of fantasy. I was worried that *Cuckoo Song* might fall into this same trap but happily this is not the case. What we see on the page here is marvelously odd while still working within an understood framework. I wouldn't change a dot on an i or a cross on a t.

Story aside, it is Hardinge's writing that inevitably hooks the reader. She has a way with language that sounds like no one else. Here's a sentence from the first paragraph of the book: "Somebody had taken a laugh, crumpled it into a great, crackly ball, and stuffed her skull with it." Beautiful. Line after line after line jumps out at the reader this way. One of my favorites is when a fellow called The Shrike explains why scissors are the true enemy of the Besiders. "A knife is made with a hundred tasks in mind . . . But scissors are really intended for one job alone – snipping things in two. Dividing by force. Everything on one side or the other, and nothing in between. Certainty. We're in-between folk, so scissors hate us." If I had half a mind to I'd just spend the rest of this review quoting line after line of this book. For your sake, I'll restrain myself. Just this once.

When this book was released in England it was published as older children's fare, albeit with a rather YA cover. Here in the States it is being published as YA fare with a rather creepy cover. Having read it, there really isn't anything about the book I wouldn't readily hand to a 10-year-old. Is there blood? Nope. Violence? Not unless you count eating dollies. Anything remarkably creepy? Well, there is a memory of a baby changeling that's kind of gross, but I don't think you're going to see too many people freaking out over it. Sadly I think the decision was made, in spite of its 11-year-old protagonist, because Hardinge is such a mellifluous writer. Perhaps there was a thought to appeal to the Laini Taylor fans out there. Like Taylor she delves in strange otherworlds and writes with a distinctive purr. Unlike Taylor, Hardinge is British to her core. There are things here that you cannot find anywhere else. Her brain is a country of fabulous mini-states and we'll be lucky if we get to see even half of them in our lifetimes.

There was a time when Frances Hardinge books were imported to America on a regular basis. For whatever reason, that stopped. Now a great wrong has been righted and if there were any justice in this world her Yankee fans would line the ports waiting for her books to arrive, much as they did in the time of Charles Dickens. That she can take an event like WWI and the sheer weight of the grief that followed, then transform it into dark, creepy, delicious, satisfying children's fare is awe-inspiring. You will find no other author who dares to go so deep. Those of you who have never read a Hardinge book, I envy you. You're going to be discovering her for the very first time, so I hope you savor every bloody, bleeding word. Taste the sentences on your tongue. Let them melt there. Then pick up your forks and demand more more more. There are other Hardinge books in England we have yet to see stateside. Let our publishers fill our plates. It's what our children deserve.

For ages 10 and up.

Alienor ✕ French Frowner ✕ says

Considering that there's a creepy doll on the cover (my worst nightmare, with clowns), I'd say that I'm feeling pretty brave today. WOOT!

~~I don't care it's middle-grade I'm SURE of my ability to be scared by it nonetheless What that says about me I don't quite know~~

Melissa ♥ Dog/Wolf Lover ♥ Martin says

www.melissa413readsalot.blogspot.com

Well that book was nutzy cuckoo, no pun intended.

Triss wakes up and can't remember what happened to her, or who her family is, or why she is so hungry. I thought she was some kind of weird monster... well... I'm not telling you!

Triss has a sister named Pen that seems to hate her guts. She runs around calling her a monster... so what in the crap is going on?

Her parents take her to the doctor and he says Triss is fine except she is losing weight and needs to be allowed to eat all she wants... WELL... she eats almost all of the food in the house at one freaking sitting! I was on the edge of my seat wanting to know what in the world is going on.

There are a few strange characters in the book, but I can't really talk about them or it might give something away. I think this is a good, dark little book. It's not gross or anything, it's just strange and creepy. But there is something that I just really like about it. I guess because I'm weird and strange... I'm not creepy though!!

Fin

Amanda says

This book is just fantastic! It's well written and has a great characters. It's a little bit creepy (ok a lot creepy in some places) and it definitely has a dark side to it. I was completely engaged from beginning to end. I really hope the author considers writing more about these characters. I would happily read more about Trista and Violet with a little bit of Triss and Pen thrown in.

Tanya says

I don't care what this is going to be about, I want to read it. *Real bad.*

In Frances Hardinge, I trust.

Nikki says

I didn't know Frances Hardinge had a new book out soon, so when I saw someone else talking about it in the Stacking the Shelves meme among book bloggers, I had to try. And lo and behold, I was approved for it on Netgalley. Thanks, guys!

So today I had a long train journey -- four to five hours. I loaded Cuckoo Song onto my reader before I left, and had it finished before I even reached halfway. It's a compulsive read without naked demands for attention; the tension is, for the most part, in uneasiness and anxiety, in a nagging feeling that things aren't right. It's done incredibly well, to my mind. Mild spoilers lie ahead!

Hardinge has chosen a really interesting perspective here in the changeling-child story. Normally the changeling would be the enemy, or nothing more than a doll. But Trista has a heart and a mind, and she makes everything work out differently -- in a way that I think, actually, is better for all involved. Without being wish fulfilment: not everyone came home safe.

Really, knowing this is a changeling story doesn't affect what Hardinge does with the story. The story itself is, in a way, a cuckoo child, a changeling.

I liked the ambivalent portrayal of the central family. The narrative upends things several times: there are no simple answers, no unequivocal good family/bad family. It's the more real for that, even in the midst of a fantasy story. I liked the way Trista had to earn Pen's trust, I like the big/little sister dynamic. I liked that neither version of even our heroine is unequivocally good. Flawed human beings, all -- though of course, not all of these characters are human...

Heather *Awkward Queen and Unicorn Twin* says

[about not knowing who she was and being a real person (hide spoiler)]

Lindsay says

A dark little tale of a faerie changeling, family and loss with a compelling heroine.

Triss is a young daughter of wealthy parents in 1920s England. The story picks up with Triss recovering from a nasty near drowning experience that's left her unable to remember some things about her life and a sense of overall wrongness. And her 9 year old sister Pen appears to be terrified of her. It's fairly quickly apparent that she isn't actually who she thinks she is, and for a large swathe of the novel refers to herself as

Not-Triss.

There's a lot more going on here than a simple changeling story. There's an important reason for the swap, there's a vile enemy behind the kidnapping and Not-Triss has allies she has no idea of. The relationships that Not-Triss quickly creates by just being herself are wonderful and the real core of the book, along with Not-Triss's unlooked-for heroism. This coming out of a sadly twisted family situation as well. There's a conversation that Not-Triss has with a family member late in the book that's heartbreaking; an adjective that fits much of this wonderful book.

Read it.

Jessica ✿ ⇨ Silverbow ⇨ ✿ Rabid Reads-no-more says

Reviewed by: Rabid Reads

4.5 stars

I don't read very many middle grade books.

It's not that I don't like them or that I think I've outgrown them . . . I'm just not . . . very interested in the kinds of stories and perspectives that frequent the age 9 - 12 bracket.

BUT.

There's a reason I don't ostracize them entirely, and that reason is HARRY POTTER. The first several HARRY POTTER books can be classified as many things, but they are definitely middle grade, and they encapsulate the very best that MG has to offer: a story for ALL ages. A story that engages children, adolescents, and adults alike. A story that parents and grandparents can read to their children and grandchildren *or* read for themselves.

If doesn't happen often, but when it does . . . pure magic.

CUCKOO SONG by France's Hardinge is one such story.

Ironically, I almost DNF-ed it in the first 10%.

I might not completely shun MG books, but it takes quite an inducement to get me to pick one up, and if it hadn't been for the numerous recommendations from friends and bloggers I know and trust, I wouldn't have made it past the creepy shrieking doll scene that followed the mysteriously mysterious beginning.

However . . . I was determined to give it a fair shot, so I persevered. *salutes trustworthy bookish friends*

The story opens with our 13-year-old main character Triss waking up in bed, surrounded by adults she cannot place, unable to recall how she got there or even what her name is.

The adults turn out to be her parents and a doctor, and after careful questioning to determine what she remembers (not much), they tell her what they know: Triss stumbled into their vacation cottage the night

before--after having been put to bed--cold, wet, and disoriented. They believe she fell into the "Grimmer," but they have no idea how it happened.

Triss, it seems, is a sickly, but obedient girl, and leaving in the middle of the night for an impromptu swim is completely uncharacteristic behavior.

While the doctor is explaining to Triss that her memories should continue to return with a little time and rest, her younger sister Pen pokes her head into the room and promptly unleashes a tirade to the tune of, "That's not my sister! She's a fake! How can you be fooled by that awful creature who is *not* my sister!"

No one pays Pen any mind b/c as good and obedient a daughter as Triss is, Pen is equally disobedient and BAD.

So Pen's tantrum is ignored by all . . . except Triss, who can't seem to get the accusation out of her head . . .

B/c despite her returning memories, Triss is experiencing . . . *oddities*: a ravenous hunger that no amount of food seems able to satiate, waking up covered in dirt and leaves with no idea how they got there, and the aforementioned dolls coming to life. *shudders*

And that's all I'm telling you about that. It's hard though. This tale is so wonderfully imaginative that it's almost painful to hold it all in.

The characters are also fantastic.

There were half a dozen (at least) memorable secondaries, but it was the sisters that truly shone.

Triss and Pen . . . were *complicated*. I'd already heard that one of the highlights was the wonderful portrayal of their relationship, and I was confused about that for a long time. BUT. By the end, not only was I in complete agreement, I also appreciated how honest the portrayal was.

Yes, there are gooey, glowy moments of sisterly adorableness, but there were also moments of the kind of bitter spite that can *only* be accomplished by sisters, and without those bitter moments . . . the lovely ones aren't nearly as sweet.

As engaging as the characters and this world were, what I loved most was how Hardinge used the disruption to shake this family out of stagnation.

A tragedy occurred years prior, and since that time the Cresents have been pretending: that things are *fine*, that one daughter must be coddled and protected, that the other is acting out and any reaction enables the behavior . . . and the girls have been slowly suffocating . . .

But one strange event begins a chain reaction that forces the Cresents on a path to acceptance and recovery.

CUCKOO SONG by Frances Hardinge is hilarious and bizarre and absolutely darling. The sisters and creatures were delightful, the adults (with one notable exception) horrid, but *mostly* redeemable . . . It's a fantastically entertaining story that is also peppered subtly with wisdom and thought-provoking messages that apply to readers of every age and station, and I highly recommend it to one and ALL.

Miriam says

This was excellent, every bit as good and creepy as her Well-witched.

This dark and rich engagement with the supernatural was what I was hoping for from "In the Shadow of Blackbirds" by Cat Winters (although absent the romantic element).

Eilonwy says

Four and a half stars!

Triss has always been ill, it seems, suffering from a string of fevers and other symptoms. But one day she wakes up with the conviction that something is far more wrong than usual. Her parents' and younger sister's reactions confirm her suspicions. But what could be different? She feels like the same Triss as always -- doesn't she? As Triss tries to solve the mystery of herself, she also discovers some deep secrets that threaten to destroy her family. Can she fix herself -- and her family -- before everything falls apart?

I absolutely loved this book! From the opening line to the close, the action and writing just grabbed me and pulled me along, barely aware that I was reading -- it felt as if I was living this story right along with Triss. My only objections were a few too many "like" and "as if" constructions, which occasionally did kick me out of my immersion in the story. Otherwise, I was one with Triss and her frightening, emotional journey.

I found this book to be a perfect blend of non-stop nail-biting action and rewarding character development. The first quarter or so of the story is tense and confusing, as the reader knows only what Triss does and shares in her bewilderedness. Why do her parents seem so distant and cold despite being so concerned? Why does Pen, her little sister, hate her so much? Why can't Triss remember what happened before she fell ill this time? As she seeks the answers, her discoveries are mirrored in her changing relationships with the people around her, and in her own understanding of herself. This story is surprisingly *deep*, touching on trust and betrayal, the difficulty of accepting tragedy, and the damage caused by keeping secrets, all while showing insight into and compassion towards all the characters, even when they seem to be doing reprehensible things. The progression of the relationship between Triss and Pen was both touching and funny. In addition, the plot was fairly unpredictable, with some very unexpected twists and turns.

Thanks to Jessica, whose review made me snatch this book up as soon as I saw it! I highly recommend this, and I'm planning to look for more books by Frances Hardinge in the very near future. I hope the rest of them live up to this one!

Wendy Darling says

Creepy, complex, **genuinely frightening**, thrilling, sad, and **unbelievably tender** and hushed and beautiful all at once. This is **a dark, violent fairy tale**, it's a mystery, it's a fantasy, it's horror, it's historical, it's gothic, and it's also the story of a girl trying to find a place for herself among **a grieving family torn apart by war**. The family dynamics and **sister relationship** are so well done, as are the way the book handles loss and longing. And on top of that? **Feminism** and jazz and tea shops and plates and plates of cake! (view spoiler)

I haven't read a middle grade book with this much nuance and wild imagination and feeling since The Golden Compass--and I'm betting those who liked Coraline or the original Grimm's fairy tales will like this. I was thrilled by the **intense creepiness** and dread of the mystery behind Triss' illness, I was outraged by what she has to endure, and I teared up over what was to become of her. Best read knowing as little about the plot as possible--just enjoy the wonderfully descriptive writing, the perfectly paced plot, and the experience of not knowing where the story will go next.

Love love love love love. And now I have to read everything else Frances Hardinge has ever written.

Kim wrote a real review for the blog here, since my middle of the night ramblings aren't all that cohesive:
<http://www.themidnightgarden.net/2014...>

Rebecca says

Not my usual kind of read but I did like it. It started and ended wonderfully, but it lost me a bit in the middle and felt just a bit too long. Definitely worth persevering with though. Overall a very odd and creepy book that's unlike anything I've ever read.

On a scale of 1 to 10... 6

Source: Kinokuniya (Sydney)
