

Which Witch? *by* Eva Ibbotson



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Reviews of the *Which Witch?* *by* Eva Ibbotson

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This book was an oft-read favorite when I was a little girl in the mid-80s. The wry humor is great for adults as well as kids, the characters are fantastic, and it's a satisfying and delightful read. People comparing it unfavorably to Harry Potter should note the copyright date and credit this book accordingly. It's actually a lot funnier.

The problem - now that I read it as an adult - is that I am not sure I could conscionably read it to a little girl. It's basically a beauty pageant, in which the talent portion is won by men. All the women are mocked. The one competent woman in the competition is a villain. The winner only wins by... Well, not through any power of her own. Aside from some really offensive cultural stereotypes, this books models some of the worst cliches about "prince, come save me!" female submission. I would feel uncomfortable reading this to my daughter.

The underlying moral of story is one of racial blindness, and it executes that laudably. Also, as a little girl, I also thought Belladonna was a drip, so maybe kids are smarter than I give them credit for. Still, a re-read made me uncomfortable.

ndup

I've been making my way through a fairly long list of recommended books by my librarian friend, and next on the list came this one--a book that, at first, I didn't realize was over 30 years old, which goes to show how well the story has held up over time.

When a powerful wizard named Arriman the Awful comes to realize he'll need an heir to his legacy, he decides to get married, and holds a contest to see which witch is the most powerful and darkest to be his wife. Belladonna, a "white witch" who can only conjure flowers, cute animals, and other cheerful things, is determined to win--not only Arriman's heart, but also the respect of the witch community. With the help of some new friends, including an orphan boy named Terrance (who has a few secrets of his own), can Belladonna summon the power within herself to win the contest?

This story is definitely for someone with more macabre tastes (and at times, the writing gave me an "Addams Family" vibe). But all the characters are either likeable or memorable--even the ones with small parts brim with personality. Arriman comes off as dark and scary to everyone else, but is a total dork behind the scenes when no one's watching. And each of the witches have their own unique backstory, powers, and animal companions (called a "familiar"). Rather than the traditional black cat, these ladies tote around chickens, an octopus, an aardvark, and an earthworm, among other things (something that I thought was both unique, as well as funny).

The star, of course, is Belladonna, who remains a kind, caring, and loving person, even when the other witches constantly berate her for being different. It's easy to like her, as well as root for her as she tries her hardest to win the contest. Putting it mildly, it's hard for her to try to be something she's not, and in the end, she (as well as the reader) learns it's better to just be herself. Her friend, Terrance, also comes into his own, and learns how to stick up for himself, discovering he's much stronger than he looks.

Also worth noting is that despite the witches casting "dark" magic, "dark" doesn't exactly mean "evil". While they DO cast some pretty creepy spells, it's almost always just for show, and if they DO cast a spell on someone, the spell is either eventually reversed, or the people were despicable and sort of deserved some punishment to begin with. And when they accidentally do something truly horrifying, they're honestly upset about what they've done. So parents interested in reading this to their kids can rest easy in that sense. However, considering this book was written 30 years ago, there's more than a few words that either aren't used now a days, or they have completely different meanings, so parents should either screen this ahead of time before giving this to their kids, or alter a few of the words as they read it. (Although, considering some of the creepy imagery, especially towards the last third of the book, I'd recommend this for older kids to begin with.)

Although on the macabre side, this is both a funny and enlightening tale about discovering your talents, being yourself, and daring to buck tradition and be different. A great book to read around Halloween.

Manesenci

This book speaks directly to my inner child, and I use it as a comfort read when I have a fever or am sick. I would not want to be without a copy during flu season. I can imagine keeping it in the house, as one would band aids or ibuprofen. The author, Eva Ibbotson is one of my heroes. Similarity of idea between her books and the Harry Potter books have been noted, and her response, as noted on her Wikipedia page makes my heart sing. We are all indeed indebted to each other, and should feel honored by that.

My favorite theme in this book is the birth of a dark wizard to two different families, and the different responses of the families. My second favorite theme is the protagonist's response to the challenges of being, well, "different." My third favorite theme is the way different characters care for each other, or don't. This book -- full of witches, necromancy, and competition -- is really all about love.

Of course, to enjoy it you have to have a tolerance for fantasy and whimsy. And since it is aimed at children, it won't help you forget workplace stress or news headlines. But if you know any girls between 6 and 11, or if you like witches and think you might get a fever or a nasty head cold, you might want to stock up on a copy or two. You could keep one copy stashed with the cold remedies. I just store mine on my kindle.

Nirad

If you have young readers and you haven't yet discovered Eva Ibbotson, this is a good place to start.

My granddaughter, (age 6), happened to be at the house when this book arrived and she helped open the package. She was immediately taken by the cover and wanted to know what the story was about. I explained it was about a wizard who holds a contest in order to choose a witch wife. Well, we had to start reading it right then and there.

The book is funny in that non-ironic but subtle way that the Muppets are - broad humor for the little ones, some very sly and dry humor for the grown-ups. Ibbotson is cheerful and good-hearted, with just a touch of that Dahl darkness that so many people seem to like.

There are actually some scary parts - the wizard is a dark wizard and he needs a dark witch wife. The heroine, Belladonna, is a white witch in spite of her desire to be dark, and the plot turns on her failed attempts to be evil. The opportunities for moralizing are obvious, but Ibbotson has a very delicate touch, and the conclusion is satisfying, both for adults and for little kids' sensibilities.

If you are tempted, the sample chapter fairly reflects the tenor of the whole work, so reading it will give you a proper sense of the book.

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