

# The Globe And Mail

## Stand up and be counted

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Byline: Cori Dusmann

### THE PRINCE OF NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

By Seán Cullen

Penguin Canada, 384 pages, \$12.99

On first glance, Toronto comedian Seán Cullen's venture into the world of writing for children might have seemed to be a departure. Reading Cullen's popular Hamish X series, however, reveals a strange sense of consistency: with their boisterous humour, their outlandish plotting and their refusal to take themselves seriously, the novels aren't at odds with Cullen's day jobs at all.

His new novel, however, is something different altogether. The Prince of Neither Here Nor There is described as the first book in The Chronicles of the Misplaced Prince series. It's a fantasy adventure for young adult readers and, while it shows promise, it is not without its problems.

Nevertheless, The Prince of Neither Here Nor There is worth reading, especially for a reader new to Faerie lore. Cullen has written an action-packed tale filled with magical battles and adventure, replete with a new take of Faerie and human origins. The young hero shows himself to be a resourceful teenager who stands strong in his decisions as he discovers the potency of his magical heritage. While remaining open for the sequels that Cullen has no doubt planned, The Prince of Neither Here Nor There satisfies as an independent story.

The novel's prologue takes the reader to an orphanage on, of course, a dark and stormy night. An infant is dropped off outside under mysterious circumstances, swaddled in a beautiful blanket but with no note. He does, however, wear a golden pendant with the name Breandan carved into it. Before the Mother Superior sees the necklace, it is taken by a superstitious Irish ex-convict who works as a handyman at the orphanage, though he suggests 'Brendan' as a good name for the child.

Fourteen years later, Brendan Clair is a typical misfit teenager, living with his parents and older sister in Toronto. He attends a small school for gifted kids, and his day-to-day concerns include avoiding the school bully and trying to gain the attention of one of the pretty, popular girls in his class. Clumsy and accident-prone, with glasses, braces and acne, Brendan has only a few friends, but they are ones he can rely on.

Brendan's life first takes a turn for the surreal when his chemistry teacher is replaced by Mr. Greenleaf, a dapper, smooth-voiced substitute with a penchant for

magic tricks. Dizziness and a burning, itchy sensation in the strange scar he has had on his chest since he was an infant distract him throughout the class and after.

Later that day, he is captivated by a poster for a concert featuring a beautiful Celtic singer who, like Mr. Greenleaf, seems strangely familiar, only to find upon arriving home that his father has tickets for the concert the following night. With that concert, Brendan's life will change in ways he never could have imagined: He is, in reality, a Faerie prince, hidden away in the human world, and his magical relatives have come looking for him.

When a well-meaning magical relative lifts the glamour that has kept him invisible to the Faeries who have been looking for him, Brendan finds himself on the run. Faced with a choice between opposing factions of his new-found Faerie family, who differ strongly in their beliefs on the merits of remaining at peace with humans, and separated from his adopted human family, Brendan must go on a quest for the amulet that will awaken his Faerie powers.

It's hardly an original storyline, but there's no way it can be: The hero with a mysterious birthright, the revelation of a destiny, the quest for his own manhood - these are all archetypal stuff. In its execution, however, Cullen's novel suffers in comparison to other recent treatments. With its school-aged protagonist suddenly discovering that his life is not what he believed it to be, going on a quest only he can accomplish, in a magical world set within our reality that only select people can see, The Prince of Neither Here Nor There is highly reminiscent of - for example - Rick Riordan's popular Percy Jackson and the Olympians series.

However, while Riordan effortlessly pulls the reader wholly into the story through his use of strong characters and engaging writing, Cullen's characters are flat and border on the clichéd, while his short, choppy sentences, which follow the same simple repeating structure throughout the novel, are so repetitive as to make even the most exciting content monotonous. One hopes that Cullen will flesh out his characters and expand his range in subsequent books, much as he did in the second Hamish X novel.

The issues with the main storyline, however, are of less concern than with Cullen's overall approach to storytelling. The Prince of Neither Here Nor There begins with an introduction by what appears to be the same omniscient narrator as appeared in the Hamish X book. As in those books, his comments also appear throughout the story in a series of often lengthy

footnotes, reminiscent of those used by Lemony Snicket or Terry Pratchett, but without the wit or, frankly, the point.

The approach was much more appropriate for his previous trilogy (although occasionally frustrating there, as well) and serves to add nothing to the straightforward fantasy of *The Prince*. In fact, the footnotes often serve only to remove the reader from the flow of the story with meaningless tidbits of fact and fiction. It feels like the frustrating disruptions of the class clown at the back of the room.

Cori Dusmann is an educator and writer living in Victoria.

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### The Prologue

A storm lashed Saint Bartholomew's Orphanage as though intent on peeling the slate roof away to gain entry to the old red-brick building on Liberty Street. St. Bart's stoically withstood the howl of the wind and the torrents of rain as it had for over a century. Water gushed from its leaky gutters, pooling in the asphalt courtyard and overflowing the sewer grate, creating a small lake at the bottom of the cracked stone steps leading up to the front door. In the flashes of lightning, the slate roof tiles glistened like molten lead traced with silver. The building seemed to cringe as the thunder rolled across the purple night sky.

... The sound of a baby crying cut through the drumming of the rain. Sister Cecilia's head jerked upright and, for a second, she thought she saw two small faces peering into the rain-streaked window. She blinked and looked again but they were gone. She could have imagined it, but she hadn't imagined the sound of the baby crying. Years of comforting frightened children had honed her ears to pick up that sound. A baby was out there in the terrible storm. She immediately dropped the clean cup back into the soapy dishwater with a plop and went to the kitchen door.

... "Drop him and let's go. We've done what himself asked us to do."

"Drop it? ... I only just picked it up again!"

"Just drop it and scamper!"

From *The Prince of Neither Here Nor There*

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