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BOOKTRUST TEENAGE PRIZE

Exchange

Paul Magrs

"I loved every page of it."
MELVIN BURGESS

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Following the death of his parents, 16-year-old Simon moves into his grandparents' claustrophobic bungalow, which quickly becomes a refuge from his bullying peers. United by their voracious appetite for books, Simon and his grandmother stumble across the Great Big Book Exchange—a bookshop with a difference. There they meet impulsive, gothic Kelly and her boss, Terrance—and the friendships forged in the Great Big Book Exchange result in startling and unsettling consequences for all of them.

Exchange Details

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Author : Paul Magrs

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Natalie says

Wow! Just wow! This book is fantastic... I started off thinking this would just be pretty much a rip off of matilda, with the main character being obsessed with books. But no, the story blossomed into something amazing! The novel is told in the 3rd person, and focuses on the main protagonist, the hopelessly pessimistic Simon. A 16 year old torn apart by the death of his parents. He lives with his endlessly optimistic gran Winnie and her explosive husband ray.

Every Saturday, Simon and Winnie go out on the bus for a day out in the city. You'll never guess what to do! To buy books! But one day they stumble across a mysterious bookshop called "the great BIG book exchange" from there they meet two amazing friends, an "armless" man called Terrance and his one employee Kelly.

Now, I'm not gonna give much else away in case you've not read it yet (in which case I strongly recommend you do) but I am gonna say there are some unsettling and depressing scenes, but they just make the happy moments oh so much sweeter!

I love how the book reads kinda like a soap opera, flitting from character to character every few scenes. I think it makes the novel more exciting, because there are some parts in which Simon does some pretty bad things to his grandad and once he's done it it flits back to his grandad and the story carries on. I would recommend this to absolutely anyone! It truly is a modern masterclass in ya lit!

Rosie Ellen says

A book about reading books - my idea of heaven, right? - but something about this book didn't really work for me. I started off getting quite into it, but by the end I didn't really care much about any of the characters and I was a little bored by it really. Maybe I identified with the idea of a teenager who'd rather stick their head in a book than socialise with their peers, and I loved the idea of the book exchange (basically like a CEX solely for unique and interesting books), but I was disappointed with the way the relationships played out. In the end it just fell flat - there wasn't really much of an ending to speak of. Another case of a disappointing ending following a promising start - boo.

Cindy says

This is a totally different written book than that I normally read, but I liked it a lot! It somehow is full with the love of reading and I totally understand that. I haven't as many books as Winnie has, but that is because I read a lot from the library, but I love the idea of the exchange. If it was close to me, I would visit it and get my books from there. I even would love to work there. I also like the idea of leaving books somewhere for somebody else to read which was suggested near the end of the book.

Clo says

The idea of this book was awesome, however the execution of it was alright, I feel like it was hard to connect

to Simon as a character and not just because he lost his parents. To be honest I connected more to his grandma, Winnie, than him.

However I did enjoy this book, but it lacked the power to really make me want to not stop reading.

Abbie Pine says

I'd heard some good things about this book, and I don't think it really matched up to those reviews. It was a good book - interesting, well-written - but it didn't capture me in the way that I want the books I read to. I still recommend it to everybody who has a passion for books, but it didn't really do it for me.

Hannah says

Well that was unexpected! I bought this book years ago (2007 I think) and have only just got round to reading it. It's really something special!

I understand why people might not like it, not all that much happens but I loved it. It's relaxing and easy to read with believable, relatable characters from teenagers to pensioners. Simon's love for books is pretty well parallel to mine. Some of what he says about stories and characters really spoke to me.

The idea of the Exchange is amazing and I want to join one right now, not convinced there are any around here though, unfortunately.

Not much story here, which I assume is why a lot of the reviews are pretty average, but fantastic characters who continue to grow throughout and a very easy read.

Nina says

At first, I wasn't keen on this book - there was just something about the blurb that sounded...boring, I guess. But I was curious about the Great Big Book Exchange. I mean, being a book worm myself, the GBBE sounds like a kind of heaven to me - limitless books which you can chop and change whenever you like. Anyway - even though I wasn't too interested at first, it really proved me wrong. I actually got quite hooked - I wanted to find out what happened next, so I barely put it down. But in all honesty, even though I enjoyed it, it was a bit bland and...simple. There was a storyline but it was like you didn't notice it. The book is basically Simon and his grandmother going to and from this book exchange place. Will Simon get with Kelly? Will Winnie leave Ray and get with Terrance? I don't want to spoil it for anyone, but nothing exciting happens. It's just a story about a part of a sixteen year old's life. So, even though I did like it...I also didn't. The idea of the GBBE is a brilliant idea, and I personally think that if Magrs improved on the characters and the storyline, it would have been a brilliant novel.

Sarah says

Such a strange book. The whole tone of it was gravid with dread, like something awful was about to happen, so I was waiting for the big reveal the whole time. Even the blurb hinted at some dark secret, and then NOTHING happened! In fact now that I think back over it the plot of this book was so mundane it's ridiculous. A boy moves in with his grandparents and bonds with his gran over love of books. They find an interesting new bookshop and make friends with the owners. A writer that the gran knew as a child comes back to town and remembers her and... that's it! But the writing style made it all seem rather compelling and gripping, so I guess there's that.

I was totally expecting the Book Exchange to be magic or supernatural in some way - a time warp, a portal to another dimension, an extremely detailed hallucination, or *something*. The whole time I was theorising that Kelly was Ada from the past that had travelled into the future or the grandad was really... I don't know. Something. And I was so disappointed when none of that happened. There wasn't really a plot or a point to the book, it was more like an account of someone's ordinary boring life than a novel. Which is realistic, I grant you, but the whole POINT of fiction - as Simon actually says in the book - is that it's more interesting, more dramatic, more conclusive, than real life.

I also don't tend to like books that spend worshipful paragraphs ranting on about books and how great they are and how wonderful reading is and so on. It annoys me, I can't really figure out why. It's like... preaching to the converted. I already know reading is great, that's why I'm *doing it right now*. How about you stop raving about how magical stories are, and tell me an actual story?

A final gripe: Book Exchanges are a dime a dozen, I don't know why the main character and everyone in the book was like "oooh what a fascinating new concept that I've never heard of, this is probably the only one in the WORLD!" ALSO, the book exchange in this book had dumb rules and was pretty much a library that you had to pay for. In PROPER book exchanges, you buy whatever the heck books you want and keep them as long as you like, and can exchange books that you don't want for credit.

Andrea says

This book was pleasantly entertaining, but it did not keep me riveted, on the edge of my seat, or absolutely captivated. It was a book that I could take out when I was bored, yet still not be completely immersed in it. This story is about a teenage boy whose parents die, so he has to go live with his grandparents. He and his grandma bond over their love of books, while this same love distances them from his grandfather. Over one of their town excursions they discover a place called The Great Big Book Exchange where they meet the gothic Kelly and Terrance, the man with two plastic arms. In this store, Simon makes friends in the books and in the people who work there. While his Grandma reconnects with her past.
here come the spoilers!!

But, the plot was refreshing because it wasn't your typical YA novel; the boy and girl don't end up together, the passionate affair is not an affair at all, the reunion isn't a happy-ever-after kind of thing, and the grandma stays with the crazy, alcoholic husband.

Now, while these things sound highly unpleasant, they weren't. They were actually the best part of the book. Nothing ended up the way you thought it would, and even though it seems like it had a terrible ending, it didn't. There were no loose ends, & the characters were happy.

That's another plus; the characters seemed real & I could totally relate to them (about the being in love with

books part, not the parents being dead or having in an alcoholic husband or grandfather or having two plastic arms or being a goth). They were completely eccentric, original characters and I could relate to them! & they made me wish that a place like The Great Big Book Exchange really existed.

Sascha Sim says

This is the sort of book that is interesting, but no so interesting. I read this book 10 years ago, while I have forgotten most books that I have read, it surprised me that I remembered this "unimpressionable" book the most. Unimpressionable, yet so unforgettable. It's a strange treasure.

Jane Currie says

Simon, a painfully shy and withdrawn teenager, struggles with day to day life after his parents' death, now living with his elderly grandparents in a new town and attending a new school. The only thing Simon has in his life are his books, something which bonds him to his kind and wistful grandmother Winnie. When they come across the Great Big Book Exchange one day, they can both sense some long yearned-for excitement coming into their lives. With the owner Terrence and his quirky, brash young assistant Kelly, Simon and Winnie find themselves returning more and more frequently to the Exchange, resulting in some personal histories being revealed and new relationships becoming forged.

'Exchange' has such an easy, calming feel to it that it's teetering on the edge of being too nice of a novel, but I personally feel it just about comes out on the right side. The writing style is simplistically charming but it's the storyline which gives this book its character. The catalyst of the story comes from Simon having to move due to the sudden death of his parents, but I like the fact Magrs doesn't rest on this to provide the sole focus on the novel. That being said, what is mentioned of Simon's loss is done incredibly well. Having been through something similar myself, I can say that Magrs portrays the disassociation felt by someone who has lost a close family member – or members – fairly young so well. It struck a major chord with me.

The main characters we come across aren't anything to write home about. Simon follows a long line of protagonists in novels who are swallowed by their stories; I find him a little weak and pliable. Although, I feel this might be the point. 'Exchange' is definitely one of those books where the storyline pops more than the characters. Arguably the most interesting character in the novel is Kelly, the gothic assistant of the Exchange and Simon's love interest, and I still couldn't gel with her. She's angry, pushy (not in an endearing way) and I just could not find a major redeemable feature. And yet, the scenes with these two are well-written and full of bittersweet interactions, as they provide the perfect contrast to each other.

I'll try to not divulge too much, but I should quickly mention the powerful subplot found in this book. It provides a subtle yet touching commentary on sexism of the past, uncovering potential, and the stigma of our backgrounds and upbringing. For me, it is this element of the story which fully made me rate it on the side of positive, rather than just being "meh".

Heartfelt and honest, for me 'Exchange' is a perfect example of an easy-reading novel. Don't get me wrong, I doubt this is a book to rock worlds, but it is pleasant and definitely worth a read.

Susie says

Absolutely loved this. Charming and touching and funny.

Kaarin says

Delve into the realm of rare book dealers and buyers that will lead you to an expected place and perhaps make you wonder what is real and what is an illusion.

Jane says

I got this book several years ago, at a library clearance sale. I left it lying on my shelf for all this time, picking it up from time to time and wondering if I was in the mood for it. I never quite felt like it, even though the summary at the back was fairly inviting.

A few days ago I picked it up again. I was in bed, had just finished a book, wasn't sleepy and was too lazy to get up and grab one of the books I'd borrowed from the library. So I went for a book I could reach without getting up: this one.

I started reading. For the first few pages I wasn't sure I was going to continue. But the next day, I persevered, and before I knew it I was completely hooked and looking for any excuse to keep reading.

This book has everything I love, and rarely find, in a young-adult novel. The style is clear, simple and articulate, without over-simplification or condescension. The plot is low-key but well-paced, even gripping at times. The characters are alive with realistic, nuanced and well-written emotion; their stories are told and developed with quiet yet masterful precision and plenty of feeling. At the end I felt like I could have read another 300 pages of their adventures.

And throughout there was a beautiful and moving discourse on books, reading, telling stories and being a reader. That alone would have made the book worth reading.

If this lovely novel is languishing on your shelf, don't wait as long as I did before you crack it open.

Angela Jr. says

Exchange is far from a literary masterpiece, but it's a nice and enjoyable story. After all, I couldn't not read a book that is all about books, could I? There are some interesting thoughts inside Simon's mind, some of them I agree with, some of them not so much. Still, they get you to think about intriguing concepts.

The story starts out really slowly, but it quickly becomes more engaging. Maybe the ending is not all I wanted for Winnie, yet it seems fitting for her personality.

Also a big plus for this book - the cover is absolutely gorgeous!

