

Her Perilous Mansion

By Sean Williams

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Paperback
Recommended for 8-12-year-olds



Summary

In a strange mansion far from anywhere, an orphan named Almanac and a twelfth daughter named Etta find themselves working – and bickering – side by side in the largely deserted rooms. But soon they realise that the house and its inhabitants are not quite what they seem, and there's more at stake than just their jobs. Can they solve the puzzle of Her Perilous Mansion before it's too late?



Sean Williams has crafted a perfectly pitched standalone middle grade fantasy that is exciting, intriguing, and thoroughly satisfying in its solution and resolution. The storyline is inventive and the interplay between the two protagonists entertaining and engaging. Quirky secondary characters are well drawn and add a sense of fun, and play around with gender roles and expectations, so the overall feel of *Her Perilous Mansion* is light-hearted rather than intense, despite the serious challenges and trials the children must face and resolve. There's also a nice through-plot about magic relying on words and language, which will appeal to librarians.

Use in the curriculum

Her Perilous Mansion may be studied in upper primary and also lower secondary English classrooms. It is particularly relevant to the study of the craft of writing and will support students in the following general curriculum capabilities:

- literacy
- critical and creative thinking
- ethical understanding and
- personal and social competence.

As an English text *Her Perilous Mansion* may be studied:

- as an example of the construction of a fantasy world
- as a sample of the construction of a world where time, space and place can be blurred
- as a case study of creativity and the craft of writing
- by discovering how the use of language can affect character development and the resulting relationship the reader has with the characters

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Themes

- fantasy • friendship • historical homes • magic

Discussion questions

Pre-reading

Cover

Before reading the story, examine the front cover and write a short paragraph explaining what genre of book you expect this to be and why, and what sort of things you think might occur in the novel. After finishing the novel, go back to this paragraph to see whether your predictions of genre and events were correct.

Title

Why do you think the book might be called *Her Perilous Mansion*? Does the title make you want to read the story more or less?

Novel study

Chapter One

Did the first chapter of the book hook you? Were you compelled to move straight to Chapter Two? Analyse your reaction to Chapter One by asking questions such as:

- Do you like Almanac and care what might happen to him?
- Why is his arrival at the house slightly odd?
- What might have made him fall over the doorstep?
- What is unusual about the letter from Mr Packer, the Head Butler?

Think about novels or movies you have seen which are set in big, deserted, old houses. What are some of the things you have come to expect about such stories and do you think this might have influenced the way you read the chapter?

Chapter Three - Show Not Tell

This chapter is packed full of information about Etta Jacobs. Some is concrete and told to us directly, for instance the fact that Etta is the twelfth daughter of a man who desperately wanted a son and who died of sorrow soon after her birth, and some comes to us in a less direct manner and is inferred by the reader. For an example of the latter, ask yourself what Etta's decision to purloin her mother's hairpin before leaving home reveals about her personality. Divide a page in your workbook into two columns, one with the word *Told Directly*, and the other with *Shown*. Read all of Chapter 3 and make a list of examples where the author has told us directly about Etta and examples where the author has shown us Etta's reactions, thoughts and ways of saying things that help us work out for ourselves the sort of person she is.

Extension question: Why do you think the author chose to use the word *purloined* rather than *stolen* when he described Etta taking her mother's hairpin? Would your reaction to her actions have been different if the latter word had been used?

Characters

- How do Etta (Regret) and Almanac's names reflect something about each character?
- List as many adjectives as you can to describe Almanac and Etta? For instance, you might say he is orderly and that she is stubborn when they are first introduced in the

story. For each adjective you use find examples of things either says or does as proof of this characteristic.

- Do Almanac and Etta change as the story progresses? Give examples of changes in each character and why these changes occur.
- Do you think one changes more than the other?

Theme

Sean Williams says *Her Perilous Mansion* 'is about finding home, family, and yourself. The protagonists have a pretty clear idea of who they are, but no one knows for sure until they engage with other people.' In your own words explain how events in the novel illustrate this theme.

Literary Devices

'Forgetting the clothes, knowing that he must be very close now, he dug with something approaching fury. The spell had trapped him, stole from him, and robbed him not only of the chance to live a proper life outside the orphanage, but of the orderly life of the orphanage as well. Instead of employment, confusion. Instead of security, uncertainty. If he failed now, he would be trapped here until the day he died. He would not fail, and so he chopped and dug, dug and chopped, until at last the shovel blade met metal.' Page 287

Sean Williams is emphasising Almanac's fury and blind determination in this paragraph by using literary devices such as *repetition*, *contrasting sentence length*, and *order reversal*. Identify an example of each in the paragraph.

Literary Puzzles

- Did you guess the answer to the two major puzzles of the story: why the name of the manor keeps changing and the location of the spell in the cellar? If you didn't guess either answer did you find their explanations satisfying? If so, why and if not, why not?
- Can you now explain in your own words why the book is called *Her Perilous Mansion*? Why do you think Sean Williams included puzzles in this story of magic and mystery?
- 'The girl opened her mouth and said, clearly but unintelligibly, 'Hilylli sirry wi-iri hiri-ibity—' Page 216

Can you decode what Elsie is saying to her brother Hackett here? [Hint: Sean Williams says the rules are VOWELS all change to 'i', and two vowels in a row equals just 'i'), CONSONANTS change to [consonant] + 'y', so 't' becomes 'ty', and CONSONANT + VOWEL changes to [consonant] + 'i', so "to" becomes 'ti'.

Quotation

'No house is complete that isn't a home.

No spell is complete that isn't a poem.'

After finishing the book can you explain what you think Sofia Phronesis meant by her poem and how it is relevant to the story.

Book Review

Write a book review of *Her Perilous Mansion*. In the review make sure you include the book's title and author, as well as a brief summary of the story. Pay particular attention to whether you found the story and characters compelling, were intrigued by the puzzles presented, how the book made you feel as you were reading it and whether the story stayed with you after you finished it.

Author's inspiration

'The idea for Etta and Almanac's story came from a dream I had in 2017. I shared it with Garth Nix, as I perhaps do too often, and he did indeed tell me to write it down. There were a lot of steps between there and here, though.

'My original plan was not to write this book at all, at least not so quickly. I spent the following year living in Dublin, which was marvellous, and in that time I planned to work on two very different novels, neither of which involved magic at all. During that year, my wife and I visited many, many old mansions, while I fielded many, many queries about when I was going to write my "Ireland" book – leprechauns, pots of gold, etc. Nothing remotely like this came to me but the fictional manor house of Stormleigh did, by subtle sleight of mind, begin to take shape.

'Before I came home, I wrote an article ("From the Angry Shilling to the Jealous Wall", available freely on the web) about my favourite houses in Ireland. These include Lissadell House, Westport House and Bantry House – sources, respectively, of the kitchen, library, and painted ceiling of Stormleigh. Other houses provided other details while slowly, inevitably, the story itself began to take shape too.

'Like all books, this one owes a deep literary debt to writers past and present. Otfried Preussler's *Satanic Mill* (aka *Krabat*, *The Curse of the Darkling Mill*, and *Krabat and the Sorcerer's Mill*) was given to me in my teens by my best friend's mother; it's a story that has haunted me all my life and served as a pivotal inspiration for this novel. Other writers include Garth Nix, Diana Wynne Jones and Georgette Heyer (whose works I read exclusively while living in Ireland).'

— Sean Williams

The author

Sean Williams is an award-winning, #1 New York Times-bestselling author of forty-nine novels and over one hundred and twenty short stories in numerous genres, for adults, young adults and children. As well as his original fiction, he has contributed to shared universes such as Star Wars and Doctor Who, and collaborated with authors like Garth Nix. He lives in Adelaide and teaches creative writing at Flinders University.



Related texts/Further reading

Books:

Cooper, Susan. *Over Sea, Under Stone*, Puffin, 2020

Heyer, Georgette. *The Grand Sophy*, Arrow, 2013

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2018

Le Guin, Ursula. *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Puffin, 2016

Nix, Garth. *Newt's Emerald*, Allen & Unwin, 2015

Preussler, Otfried. *The Satanic Mill* (also known as *Krabat and the Sorcerer's Mill*), HarperCollins, 2010

Wynne Jones, Diana. *Howl's Moving Castle*, HarperCollins, 2009

In the classroom...



Movies:

The Haunting, Motion Picture, Argyle Enterprises, UK, 1963

Mouse Hunt, DVD, Paramount, US, 1997

The Others, DVD, Miramax, US, 2002

Games:

Final Fantasy, Video Game, Square Enix, 1987

The Legend of Zelda, Video Game, Nintendo, 1986

World of Warcraft, Video Game, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004