

Title: *A Magic Steeped in Poison*

Author: Judy I. Lin

Genre: Fantasy

Reviewer Name and Grade: Emily K., 7th Grade

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A Magic Steeped in Poison, written by Judy I. Lin, takes place in the ancient Chinese kingdom of Daxi. It centers around a young girl from the countryside, named Ning, whose mother was a shennong-shi, an entertainer who specializes in brewing often magically enhanced tea. The story traces Ning's life following her mother's death, which was caused by drinking tea made using a poisoned tea brick that had been illegally distributed throughout the kingdom. The author also depicts Ning's journey to the capital of Daxi, Jia, to participate in a competition to become the next court shennong-shi. The winner of the competition, Ning knew, would be granted a personal favor from the princess. With this favor, she had planned to ask for the assistance of the royal physicians in treating her sister, Shu, who had been suffering the effects of the same poisoned tea bricks that had killed her mother.

Originally, Shu was the one meant to attend the competition, as she had an apprenticeship under Ning's and her mother, the former court shennong-shi. Ning was a physician's apprentice, but because of her exposure to the art of teamaking, lied about her identity and used the invitation intended for her sister to participate in the competition (Shu was too weak to compete). On the way there, she met a boy in the market, who went by the name of Bo. They decided to stop at a teahouse and shared a cup of tea together before heading to the palace. Upon drinking the tea, which possessed magical properties, Ning and Bo were able to have a glimpse into each other's memories, which scared Bo to the point where he fled the teahouse. Ning walked the remainder of the journey to the palace by herself, pondering the visions she saw of Bo's past.

During the first round of the competition, the competitors were required to brew a magically enhanced tea for the judges, who were all members of the royal court. It was during Ning's turn that the palace was ambushed by assassins, who were attempting to kill the princess. Suddenly, a boy jumped in front of the princess, protecting her from arrows. Ning later discovers that the hero was Bo, whose real name, she learns, is Kang. She also is told that Kang is the son of the Banished Prince, the belligerent brother of the current emperor who was banished to a wasteland called Luzhou many years ago. Kang and Ning quickly became friends and began sneaking out of their quarters to meet privately at night.

The princess soon became aware of these meetings and instructed Ning to report back any information to her that could be suggestive of Kang's true intentions, which she suspected may be to bring his father back to a position of power. This placed Ning in a very uncomfortable situation, as she had to learn to carry the weight of saving her sister, as well as the weight of the kingdom's very safety in her hands.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

Yes, the plot definitely kept me interested, as the abundance of details provided by the author made the story feel almost lifelike and really allowed me to connect with the characters. The story also involves a lot of Ning's inner thinking, such as Ning's thoughts regarding life in the palace compared to life in her own home, which I think helps readers to better understand their situations.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace of the book was a little bit slow towards the beginning but picked up relatively quickly. Additionally, considering the story is over 350 pages long, I would recommend this book to readers who enjoy longer books, like me.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

This book does involve relationships, but it also teaches valuable lessons about bravery and morality. I think, based on content, that this book is appropriate for 6th graders and above, but I would recommend it to 7th graders due to the advanced vocabulary.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to readers who enjoy learning about customs from around the world (such as the art of ancient Chinese teamaking), or who are looking for an action-packed fantasy that also incorporates Chinese mythology and a hint of mystery.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

The book depicts some gory scenes and violent scenes, such as when Ning is treating Ruyi's, the princess' bodyguard's, wounds after she had been shot by a poisoned arrow.

5 stars: I'm really glad I read this book; it was awesome!

I really enjoyed this book- it was exhilarating, suspenseful, and everything that I look for in a YA fantasy novel. I am looking forward to reading the sequel, A Venom Dark and Sweet, and to finding out the truth behind the tea poisonings.