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Angel Stone, The

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Set in Manchester in 1604 and the present day, this is not so much a time-slip story as a drama about time itself, and the risks and limits of human aspiration to forbidden knowledge. In modern Manchester, Kate's father, a gifted but drunken researcher into time and immortality, has disappeared. Kate, already on Special Report at school, is left to fend for herself and try to find him. But Kate's story, though finally crucial, is only a small and sketchy element of the novel. Most of it takes place in the fevered intellectual and religious atmosphere of Jacobean England, and is set in the old town and its collegiate church (in later times the cathedral and grammar school), where piety, occultism and intellectual enquiry clash, and life and death have porous boundaries.

Kate's tale apart, three individual stories dominate the novel. There is Simeon, loved child of a vagrant mother, whose fine singing voice wins him a late school place despite the inconvenient fact that he is both illiterate and mentally impaired. There is Kit Morley, chorister, born to a Catholic family but passed off as a Protestant boy in the hope of safeguarding the family inheritance. And there is the Warden, the historical Dr John Dee no less, famed and feared as a scientist and magician. As long as one of these four people is centre-stage in his or her own story, the pace and tension are impressive, but once their lives have fully converged, as eventually they must, the book falls victim to its own complexities. When Kit (after many hints) is at last revealed as a girl, and moreover the selfsame girl as Kate in the present day, narrative coherence gives way to overheated melodrama. Kit and Kate are so utterly dissimilar that no tricks of time can make her plausible, and around her the supernatural mayhem grows wild and confused. Something of John Dee's excitable knowledge infects the writing, and an absorbing story finally collapses under the sheer weight of its plotlines and ideas.

Running Order:

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