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The Forbidden Orchid



Synopsis

The adventures of a British girl in China, hunting for the orchid that will save her family. Staid, responsible Elodie Buchanan is the eldest of ten sisters growing up in a small English market town in 1861. The girls barely know their father, a plant hunter usually off adventuring through China, more myth than man. Then disaster strikes: Mr. Buchanan reneges on his contract to collect an extremely rare and valuable orchid. He will be thrown into debtors' prison while his daughters are sent to the orphanage and the workhouse. Elodie can't stand by and see her family destroyed, so she persuades her father to return to China once more to try to hunt down the flower. Only this time, despite everything she knows about her place in society, Elodie goes with him. She has never before left her village, but what starts as fear turns to wonder as she adapts to seafaring life aboard the tea clipper *The Osprey*, and later to the new sights, dangers, and romance of China. She comes to find that both the world and her place in it are so much bigger than she'd ever dreamed. But now, even if she can find the orchid, how can she ever go back to being the staid, responsible Elodie that everybody needs?

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

My Thoughts: This was the first book I've read by Sharon Biggs Waller and I went in with high expectations because of all the amazing things I'd heard about this author's prior book, *A*

Mad, Wicked Folly. Overall, I found this book to be an entertaining read and enjoyed the storyline and adventure. I did have some issues with the characters but I'll get to that in a bit. First, let's talk about the things I did enjoy. The setting was lush and I felt the descriptions lent themselves to very clear imagery and helped progress the story for me. The novel was told in first person from the main character, Elodie's, point of view. I really enjoyed that the novel's progress was split into three sections, one in England, aboard a tea clipper and then the final, in China. My favorite section was the shortest, aboard the tea clipper. I felt that Waller did an exceptional job describing the boat and how it would feel to be Elodie traveling across the ocean for the first time. Where I had issues with this book was in the character representations. I felt like they were all caricatures of themselves. It's hard to explain but I'll try - some of the characters felt like they played on a stereotype rather than on an in depth character. The two most obvious to me were Deacon Wainwright and Ching Lan. Wainwright was described and acted so much like Mr. Collins (of *Pride and Prejudice*) to me. He was bumbling, homely and sexually repressed. He seemed so typical of a clergyman it stood out to me. It wasn't enough to really deter from the book but it was something I noticed. As the story moved to China I noticed other characters feeling more stereotypical than well developed.

The Forbidden Orchid takes readers on an expedition back in time to the mid 1800's England and China. There they'll meet a strong willed character, Elodie, who will do everything she can to save her family, and help her father on a dangerous expedition to find a rare orchid. In her journey she'll find her place in a world that wants to hold her back, and she'll realize that sometimes she'll have to do what she feels is right even when everyone else is telling her otherwise. I liked Elodie. She's a strong willed, opinionated girl who doesn't let her society's acceptations hold her back from doing what she feels is right. She's also intelligent and thinks things through before making a decisions. I admired how she weighed her options before taking action, especially during a time when it wasn't proper for a women to speak her mind, or do things she wasn't allowed to do. Elodie took matters into her own hands and did what she needed to do, in order to save her family. I greatly admired her for that. She described herself best on page 365, "I loved my family, but I wanted to take my place in the world. My father had named me after a wildflower, and I knew now that wildflowers could not thrive inside of greenhouses." While it took awhile for me to really get into the story, I enjoyed the historical references, the historical settings of both England, and China, and sailing between the two countries. Waller does a wonderful job with bringing her research to life with life during this time, and the war on opium, the toll it took on it's users, and those who sought to sell

it. I was intrigued by the history of plant collectors. Elodie's father is a plant collector, and his search for a rare orchid not only cost him, but it takes a huge toll on his family.

Sharon's debut young adult novel, *A Mad, Wicked Folly* was one of my favorite reads of 2015. Historical novels where women are fighting for their voices are a big "Give me this book now!" Much like Vicky, Elodie is longing for more. She wants to be able to travel the world with her father and find adventure, but it stuck at home caring for her mother and nine younger sisters. Her father (who comes home roughly once a year, impregnates his wife, then leaves again), is a plant hunter and searches the world for new and exotic plants and flowers. After a series of events (that's I won't elaborate on because spoilers), Elodie, her father, and an adorable Russian named Alex head off to the remote regions of China in search of The Queen's Fancy. Speaking of Alex, and I won't go too much into the details of their relationship because I don't want to ruin anything, but due to their circumstances and the time period, it was a slow burn of a relationship that made all the sense in the world. Some of the scenes between these two are breathtakingly cute and I took to Alex right away, and not just because of his dog, Kukla. Sharon knows how to write amazing women in a time where women were voiceless. Elodie is an exceptionally strong character (if her and Vicky's stories weren't 48 years apart, I could see them becoming fast friends) who not only dreams of more but eventually decides to take more. She doesn't take things at face value and questions the local doctor, the Deacon, her father, and every man that tells her she can't because she is a woman and has a "delicate constitution." One of the scenes that made me laugh occurs after the Deacon tells her to get ride of her orchid and has his mother explain to Elodie why.

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