



The Dream Merchant

Books Reviewed:

[The Dream Merchant](#) [1]

Issue:

[153](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

This novel was originally published in Holland and was the winner of the Golden Kiss Award, 'the most prestigious children's book award in the Netherlands'. The translation, incidentally, doesn't read like a translation at all. The author's biographical note is revealing, for it seems 'she gave up her job [as a teacher] to study literary theory full time and spent some months in Senegal...' Several of the book's elements, often lending it a sense of otherness, of the exotic, seem to come from West African roots. They rub shoulders with a crowd of more familiar tales and ideas, from the Cain and Abel story to the evils of corporate capitalism. For a while, maybe 150 pages, adventure follows adventure, without much sense of anything being gained towards a resolution. Another 500 pages of this felt daunting. It's a first novel and perhaps suffers from a surfeit of sources and themes, as if the writer wants to tell us everything about everything: intricate notions of time travelling, a centuries-old family feud in need of resolution, painful rites of passage, the interplay of parallel worlds. It takes time and stamina which, of course, many young readers have. I still believe a shorter book would have been a better book, but this mythic world relentlessly drew me into its tensions, its slippery history and the exploits of the young protagonists. You have to admire the ambition, the inventiveness and indeed the erudition of the author. It certainly is a multi-layered text where characters and conflicts are complex in their development. Unashamedly, Hoving means to teach as well as to entertain; she consistently achieves her second aim, and often her first. Mercifully, the lessons **The Dream Merchant** offers are embedded in the narrative, and the text provides another of those exciting, absorbing secondary worlds where so many young readers have become experienced travellers.

Running Order:

14

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[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-dream-merchant>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/153>

[3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>