

The Devniads, Book 1

Bob Devney 25 Johnson St., North Attleboro, MA 02760 (508) 699-7885
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Don Marquis said, "Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose-petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo."

Change the subject from poetry to fanzines and the sentiment still obtains. At least, that's the strong feeling I got in conversations at Arisia with two guys who seemed to be feeling somewhat neglected:

APA: NESFA Collator Mark Hertel and Proper Bostonian Editor Ken Knabbe.

So, Mark, here's my contribution to help you put the metal to the petal.

Reader, this is my maiden fanzine effort. When you speak of it -- which given the above you won't -- be gentle.

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Do you spend days before a con feverishly playing catch-up, reading stuff by prominent guests with whose writing you're shamefully unfamiliar? OK, so I'm the only one.

Here's my thinking. Suppose I'm trapped in an elevator with a famous writer, and attempt conversation. What topic better than his or her own work is guaranteed to fascinate a great artist?

Besides money, I mean.

Say I meet upcoming Boskone Guest of Honor Diana Wynne Jones, downgoing in an elevator. Here's how I'd schmooze.

First I dissolve her British reserve with an opening that demonstrates I'm a classy guy, fully conversant with her language -- the noble tongue of Spenser, Milton, and Shakespeare.

"Posh lift, innit, Di luv?"

If I still sense some standoffishness, I downshift into polite chatter about some neutral topic.

"How about that IRA? You have to admit they've got a point, right?"

(Credit here to my brother Mike, who said something like this as he sat down next to a British fan at last year's Boskone banquet. Seems it really broke the ice. The guy talked nonstop, sharing his feelings freely and openly with Mike for the next 5 minutes until leaving abruptly. I guess knowing the right thing to say to put people at ease is a gift with we Devneys.)

Anyway, suppose even that overture bombs. So to speak.

No problem. I simply launch into something like the following exegesis of her novel *Charmed Life* (published U.K. 1977, U.S. 1980, Pocket Books, 222 pages). She'll be putty, I tell you.

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***Charmed Life* tells the story of young Gwendolyn Chant and her brother Eric, known as Cat. They live in what seems (at least at first) to be Edwardian England, but with magic.**

Gwendolyn is an unusually promising young witch, china-doll pretty, deeply mischievous and conceited. Cat disappointingly shows no magic power at all, and is small for his age. But he's stoic about his lot, and supportive of his sister.

Jones gets off to a fast start. The children are orphaned (in a dreamily offhand manner) by the top of the book's second page. Soon a family connection sets them down in a fabulous castle as wards of the most potent personage in the land.

The great and powerful Chrestomanci is a cross between Oscar Wilde and David Copperfield. (The magician, not the Dickensian.) He's elegant. He's enigmatic. He's constantly distractedly thinking about something else. But he always comes when

somebody mentions his name. Which isn't as convenient -- or as reassuring -- as you might think...

His true character, his feelings for and relationship to the children are all mysteries they must explore. Along with encountering Chrestomanci's wife and children, their tutor and servants, and one truly cool castle. In the end, even Gwendolyn's and Cat's own natures and their relationship to each other are tested in a climactic battle of magical alliances.

As usual, the fun is in the details. Gwendolyn's escalating war of spite and spells with her hosts entertains with its many twists and turns. A baby dragon manages to mesmerize a potential victim, then suffers *dracus interruptus* because its bark is more developed than its bite: "I wish I was bigger. I could eat her now."

And there's a magic home security system that would turn Oliver North pure Marine green. Steal as much as a spoon from the estate, and once carried outside the grounds it begins to repeat loudly "I belong to Chrestomanci Castle! I belong to Chrestomanci Castle!" until returned.

I said the Chants are made orphans almost offhandedly. That's not the only time the author brings you up short and chilly. As in all good fairy tales since the Brothers Grimm, there are some -- well, grim consequences to people's actions here. High stakes are seriously played for, and painfully paid for when lost.

Jones displays a gift reminiscent of a few other authors (British mystery/

suspense master Michael Gilbert comes to mind) who show heaps of surface charm and gentle humor at first glance. But be forewarned when you follow a writer like this down the rabbit hole. Every so often you turn a dark corner and meet a snake.

Or just the writer's gaze, which ultimately casts a cold eye on life, on death. Then passes by...

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I read more SF than fantasy, and haven't yet sampled anything else by Diana Wynne Jones. But my fantasy-fan brother-in-law Bob Kuhn, who's got a real Jones Jones, recommended *Charmed Life* as his favorite of her work. He's right -- it's excellent. Apparently this was the first of several Chrestomanci books. Hope the dealer's room at Boskone is stocked up.

Incidentally, I can't quite figure out the significance of the name Chrestomanci. Sure, "chrestomathy" means a selection of one author's works, as in *The Mencken Chrestomathy*. (Another sense, new to me: "a collection of choice passages... compiled to assist in the acquirement of a language.")

But my OED simply says that "chrestos" is Greek for "useful." Obviously "manci" would be a coinage related to "necromancer," generally a magician or enchanter (Greek "manteia": "divination, prophecy"). So Chrestomanci -- "a useful magician"? Am I missing something here?

