



# The Secret Horses of Briar Hill

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Book

BfK Rating:

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The story is set in 1941, in Briar Hill hospital in Shropshire, a sanatorium for children with tuberculosis. Emmaline has been evacuated here from Nottingham, where we gradually learn a terrible tragedy has befallen her family, leaving her an orphan. From the very start Emmaline tell us she has a secret, that she can see winged horses living in the mirrors of Briar Hill. Her dear friend Anna is bed-bound and Emmaline spends her happiest hours with her, drawing the winged horses and talking. Emmaline is not as ill as Anna, but she is aware of her tuberculosis which she refers to as 'stillwaters', feeling her lungs weighed down by a thick, dark liquid - a very vivid metaphor. Emmaline herself is a quiet child, but as she remembers her mother saying, 'still waters run deep.'

The book is written in the first person, and we immediately love Emmaline for her trusting nature and her spirit. She shows herself to be brave, determined and resourceful as she does everything she can to protect the injured winged horse Foxfire from the destructive powers of the mysterious Black Horse.

The surrounding characters in Emmaline's world are sympathetically drawn. The nuns are seen to genuinely care about the children they are looking after; Sister Mary Grace is gentle and kind, and Sister Constance although strict and scolding is revealed to be caring. Benny is sneering and bullying, taking pleasure in upsetting Emmaline, but later we see a different side, a sympathy for her shown by his gesture of friendship and understanding.

The illustrations by Levi Penfold are captivating, drawing the reader even further into the alternative world of the winged horses. Towards the end of the book a series of six double-page spreads brilliantly depict the overwhelming sense of darkness and terror brought by the Black Horse, and then the bright beacon of light that cuts through the dark as Foxfire is finally able to take to the air and soar through the sky.

The story can be interpreted at different levels and children can take from it what they want to see. Is there another magical world of winged horses, which can be glimpsed through mirrors? Or are they the dreams of a traumatised and feverishly sick child? Is the Black Horse a representation of death, which is out to get Emmaline as well as her friend Anna, or is it an evil force from this other world, who hunts other horses? Are the letters from the Horse Lord or are they written by Anna and then Thomas? Whichever way, the secret horses bring hope, and through great adversity Emmaline succeeds in collecting the colours of the rainbow together to combat the dark fear that threatens her world.

This is a magical story which will hold very special appeal to young people, and they will return time and again to pore over the beautiful illustrations.

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