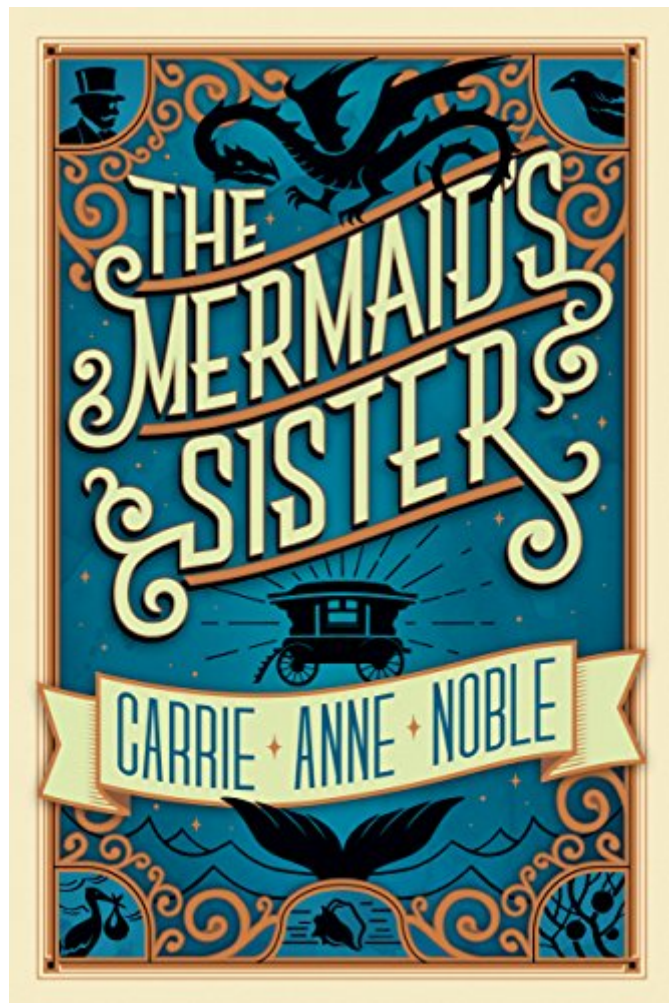


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The Mermaid's Sister



Synopsis

Breakthrough Novel Award Winner for Young Adult Fiction, 2014
Realm Award Winner for Best Speculative Fiction of the Year, 2016
There is no cure for being who you really are... In a cottage high atop Llanfair Mountain, sixteen-year-old Clara lives with her sister, Maren, and guardian Auntie. By day, they gather herbs for Auntie's healing potions; by night, Auntie spins tales of faraway lands and wicked fairies. Clara's favorite story tells of three orphaned infants: Clara, who was brought to Auntie by a stork; Maren, who arrived in a seashell; and their best friend, O'Neill, who was found beneath an apple tree. One day, Clara discovers iridescent scales just beneath her sister's skin: Maren is becoming a mermaid and must be taken to the sea or she will die. So Clara, O'Neill, and the mermaid-girl set out for the shore. But the trio encounters trouble around every bend. Ensnared by an evil troupe of traveling performers, Clara and O'Neill must find a way to save themselves and the ever-weakening Maren. And always in the back of her mind, Clara wonders, if my sister is a mermaid, then what am I?

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Customer Reviews

When I read the premise for this book, I was really excited. I adore a good fairy tale, and especially

one that weaves relatable, everyday humans with fantastical creatures. The idea is great, but the execution could have been improved. Plot-wise, it is straightforward, simple, and (for me, at least) a bit predictable. Their mission is determined at the beginning, and their mission is accomplished at the end. There aren't any twists. They do hit a few snags to slow them down (otherwise, this would be a pretty short book), but it still ends exactly how I expected. The romance is also very predictable. (But just in case you don't predict it, I won't spoil it.) In places, the writing is beautiful, perfectly fitting for a fairy tale. In the first chapter, there's a line describing the wyvern: "His blue scales, pale as a summer sky on his belly and dark as midnight on his back, catch the dim light like curved slices of stained glass." I love the poetry of it, especially describing the glass as slices. Other sentences are more awkward. For example, at one point, a smile is described as such: "[the smile] would not look out of place on a crocodile with a belly full of fresh antelope." While it gets the point across, this is a wordy way of saying the smile looks evily satisfied. The characters are cute, but they could be more developed. Clara is enamored with her sister and constantly describing her beauty. Yes, her sister is a beautiful mermaid, but it sounds like Clara has a major inferiority complex, and that's never addressed. Whenever Clara mentions herself, she talks about how she's not pretty like her sister, not brave, not skilled, not at all noteworthy. This could have been an interesting plot point, where she realizes she doesn't have to be a glorious, mythical creature to be special. But she never does. Even at the end, when someone tells her she's brave and sweet, she refuses to believe it. Meanwhile, her sister doesn't seem to live up to all the praise. The faster Maren transforms into a mermaid, the less personality she has. Once she loses her speech early in the book, all she does is pimp, cry, or stick out her tongue at Clara. She seems more like the object of a video game quest than a dimensional person experiencing a major transformation. This story has a lot of promise: One girl destined to become a mermaid, the other girl struggling to accept the loss of her human sister and realize her own self-worth as an ordinary person. It's clear the author is a wonderful writer. I just felt like a lot of aspects could have been more developed, and when they weren't, it felt a bit flat. Still, it's a fun little adventure that keeps you reading.

The author presents us with a pinch of German fairy tale style and a dash of young lady's manners and proper behavior of the 19th century. Clara is the opposite of Maren. One is introvert and lacks the courage the other is spontaneous and adventurer. Clara accepts the hard task to return her beloved sister to the ocean, now that she's turning into a mermaid. First she has a hard time to

accept that she must let her sister go. There are characters in the book that might change this fate if they wanted to, but that's not the point. This is Clara's journey and coming of age task. No one can do this but her, because this is her journey to discover who she is, to accept it, to find love and to become who she's meant to be, contrary to her sister Maren who already knows exactly who she is and where she belongs. The end: The book had a great start. It was light and I enjoyed reading it. I'm very critical with endings. It started to crumble when the "King" falls ill. I felt the ending needed more work. Somehow the way the author managed the end of the evil characters was a bit silly, even forced in some parts. It was a bit disappointing that it was too predictable, but I wouldn't say it was a waste of time. The mission was accomplished and her wishes come true.

This book was the 2014 winner of *ALA's Breakthrough Novel Competition* in the young adult category, and as a debut YA fairy tale, I can see why. There's much to appreciate about the crafting of this story, particularly the atmosphere. Most of the YA mermaid stories I've read (and the two I've thus written) are set in contemporary times, and this one isn't. The book definitely feels like it's from another time in the way it's constructed and in the way the characters speak and behave. I appreciated the setting and style so much, as I really felt transported to another time, but within a world like ours with its unique magic. This is a tale of sisterhood between Clara (the narrator) and Maren, adopted separately by the wise, magical, amiable Auntie Verity. Like true sisters should, Clara and Maren know each other intimately, and they have expected shared experiences and rivalries. While Clara is more proper, Maren is more adventurous and also more likely to have boys fawning over her. But Maren's attractiveness and boy-appeal may be in part to her otherworldliness. Auntie Verity found Maren in a seashell, and she is slowly turning into a mermaid. Maren's gradual transformation is exceptionally described, starting with a few shimmery scales on her legs and webbing between her toes and fingers. It is her webbed fingers that draw some attention at the annual local festival when a fortune teller removes Maren's gloves. After that, Maren becomes a shut-in. Though mermaids belong in the ocean, and Maren insists she wants to go there, Clara doesn't want to find a cure for Maren's condition. She enlists the help of O'Neill, adopted son of Auntie Verity's beau and traveling medicine man Scarff. O'Neill would do anything for the girls, and while Clara secretly loves him, she fears her love is unrequited because he appears to be smitten with Maren—even more so in her mermaid form. Clara doesn't want to lose her sister, but more importantly, she wants hope that her own ultimate magical condition is reversible also. Her adoption story is that she was brought by a stork, so naturally, Clara

fears she will sprout feathers and turn into a stork herself. For me, this minor subplot was one of the weak spots in the book. Given the time period, particularly Clara's own properness, I expected Clara to be Verity's actual daughter brought by the stork instead of explaining how babies were made. My prediction was wrong, and I won't spoil the reveal, but it was a bit of a letdown. The stakes are built when it's clear that Maren cannot live on land. Her skin and scales get paler, she can't speak and is often lethargic, and she's literally withering away. I didn't expect her to start getting smaller, and her shrinking definitely added some magical excitement to the story. Since Auntie Verity can't leave their mountain town, Clara and O'Neill embark on the journey to bring Maren to the ocean where Clara hopes they can convince the sea king to return Maren to human form. The journey becomes perilous as they are forced into servitude by a troupe of traveling performers, hoping to exploit the little mermaid. (See what I did there?) It becomes a difficult and fearful situation for Clara, and her concern for her sister's welfare is among the bright spot of the story. The underlying theme about the bond of sisterhood is beautifully developed. Though sisters (whether through blood or adopted parentage) may grow up together, they may eventually pursue their own destinies and live apart. It doesn't make them any less of sisters. Clara's acceptance of that and learning you must be true to yourself was handled extremely well and is undoubtedly the biggest strength of the book. This was a well-crafted fairy tale. Maybe some of the occurrences around the conflict's resolution are appropriate for the genre, but they were a little too convenient and coincidental for my liking, causing me to give this a lower rating. The premise, language, characters, and rising action are magical, but some of the resolution not as much. Overall, it is the strong sisterly relationship that gives *The Mermaid's Sister* its **FOUR STARS**.

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