The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud

Hi! Welcome to the Underground Bookshelf! In today’s video, we’ll break down some of the themes and tropes present in The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud. This book, as well as the two subsequent books in the Bartimaeus Trilogy were removed from library shelves by the School Board in Lackawanna, New York out of concern that the books might attract readers to the occult. However, the books were put back on shelves in 2008 after parents and teachers accused the board of censorship.

This video is part of my Banned Book Reviews series on this channel. This is still the beginning of this channel, but I also have videos up on All Boys Aren’t Blue by George M. Johnson and A Time to Dance by Padma Venkatraman which is part of my representation in books series. I’m also starting a series on disability representation in Marvel Comics and the MCU, so if that’s your jam, you can check out that video as well.

Before we get into The Amulet of Samarkand, I’d like to take a moment to introduce myself and my mission. My name is Laura. I’m a queer, neurodivergent writer with a functional neurological disorder. I didn’t grow up with much representation in the literature I read, and I still don’t find a lot of representation out there today. I created the Underground Bookshelf as a community platform that promotes diversity in literature and the arts because everyone deserves to feel seen. I post new short stories and resources by myself and guest writers every week. You can read these stories or learn more about becoming a guest writer by visiting my website at underground-bookshelf.com.

Fair warning, there will be spoilers in this video, so if you don’t want it spoiled, you should go read it and come back to this video. This book is set in an alternate version of history in which all the world leaders and governments are run by magicians. British society runs on a caste system with magicians at the top and everyone else at the bottom. Magicians’ power comes from controlling djin and other types of otherworldly spirits which they enslave and force to work for them. In the beginning of this book, we meet Bartimaeus, a djinni who is captured by Nathaniel, who’s apprentice to the magician Mr. Underwood. Nathaniel forces Bartimaeus to steal the Amulet of Samarkand which protects the wearer from all magical attacks. He steals it from Simon Lovelace who is a powerful magician seeking to overthrow the government. Nathaniel commits this act of theft as retribution for being beaten by Lovelace and frames Mr. Underwood as payback for not protecting him from Lovelace. This action pulls both Nathaniel and Bartimaeus into the middle of a violent and secretive political coup led by Lovelace.

In this video, I’m going to break down some of the tropes, stereotypes and other issues I picked out while reading this, but none of the issues that I talk about have anything to do with why this book was banned in the first place. As I mentioned it was banned because of what was perceived as occult imagery. I’m not a fan of banning books, which is why I review them on the internet, but this was really the least of my concerns while reading this book. It’s marketed as magical fantasy, so I expect there to be magic.

APPROPRIATION

So, I don’t know enough about all the different mythological beings across world cultures, so I can’t speak to each one individually, but it feels like this book picks creatures at random from all parts of the world without taking individual cultures into consideration. It serves to show the practice of enslaving spirits for the sake of magical power as worldwide and longstanding in world history, but it fails to offer any cultural context for any of these beings. For example, Djinn are Arabic, imps are Germanic, and foliots are Italian, but you wouldn’t know any of this by reading the book. You would have to look that up for yourself. In this book, magicians are expected to read and learn in many languages so they can learn all the ways of controlling spirits, but the audience never gets to know what the magician knows. The words, rituals, and history remain secret from the readers. To me, it comes across more as a case of appropriation rather than appreciation. For reference, according to the Oxford dictionary:

Cultural appropriation is defined as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.”

In the US, a lot of the conversation around appropriation has to do with clothing and accessory manufacturers using designs inspired by indigenous cultures without the input or permission of indigenous artists, but I think we can apply appropriation to literary practices as well. Because the book doesn’t acknowledge the history or culture pertaining to these mythical creatures and just plucks some names and characteristics and drops them into the story, this feels more on the side of appropriation.

In contrast, according to UW Madison,

Cultural appreciation is “a way of honoring another culture through exploration and seeking an understanding as a way to honor that culture, beliefs, and traditions.”

So I think if this book took more time to explore the history and culture surrounding the magical rituals and creatures from folklore around the world that are included in this story, we might have moved into appreciation territory, but we don’t even have human characters that are recognizably non-white or non-British. Even though it is mentioned that other parts of the world have magicians, there’s no actual representation of this. So we don’t really have obvious inroads in this book for where these things could have been explored in a respectful way.

STEREOTYPED WOMEN:

The women characters in this book are by far the least fleshed out. They’re very one dimensional and are really, very heavily stereotyped. The first one is Mrs. Underwood. She’s the wife of the magician that Nathaniel is apprenticed to. She’s plump and homely. Her entire character is as caregiver to her husband and Nathaniel. The only purpose that she serves is to override enough of Nathaniel’s greed for him to avenge her after her murder. His very limited character growth comes from his regret that she died because of his need to get petty revenge.

The second is Ms. Lutyens who doesn’t occupy much space in the book either. Like Mrs. Underwood, she is a commoner, meaning she doesn’t use magic. In this universe, the caste system is based around magic. Those who have none are of the lower caste and magicians are ordered according to how adept they are at magic. Ms. Lutyens kind of reminds me of Miss Honey from Matilda in that she’s sweet and patient, and likeable, but that’s pretty much all of her character. She tries to impart good morals to Nathaniel but doesn’t really get anywhere and she gets fired for being a good influence.

The third woman character is Amanda Cathcart. She stands in as the archetypal popular girl. She’s rich and beautiful and oblivious. She is used by Lovelace to facilitate his big plot to kill off all the government officials and take control of the country. But all she knows is that he wants to hold a conference, so she helps him make the arrangements and lends her mansion for the event. Like Mrs. Underwood and Ms. Lutyens, Amanda is a victim of the men around her and is considered acceptable collateral damage during Lovelace’s attempted coup. If you’re seeing a trend here, congratulations. Women, particularly women who are considered generally decent people are usable and disposable in this universe. This is something that I’m kind of tired of seeing, so I was disappointed to see it in this really highly acclaimed book.

There are two other women in this book to take note of. The first is Jessica Whitwell. She is described as rake-thin, and she is a distasteful character. She’s vicious and hauty and brutal when it comes to punishing spirits that are confined to the Tower of London. In this alternate reality, the magicians who run the UK use the Tower as a prison for spirits that have broken the law or inconvenienced the authorities in some way. Her characterization fits her into the villainous woman trope. If there were other women characters in this book who didn’t live and die in service to men, this trope wouldn’t bother me, but then, if that were the case, it wouldn’t be a trope. But Jessica Whitwell is the only named woman who has any semblance of self-determination and it’s really common for women with agency to be cast as villains because having agency takes them out of the roles and assumptions placed on them by society.

The last woman character in this book that I can recall doesn’t even have a name. She’s just the “Goth Girl.” I assume that in the future she’ll be revealed as part of the Resistance, and may have a bigger role later, but for now, she’s just identified as being suspiciously good at giving orders to the boys around her. The hints that she is a Resistance fighter make me like her potential, but her role in this book is so small that there’s nothing much more that we can say about her. At the moment, she’s the least tropey woman in this book, but she doesn’t even have a name.

FATPHOBIA

Weight is used to imply certain things about characters in this book. The two characters that stand out to me are Mrs. Underwood and Sholto Pinn. Mrs. Underwood carries a bit of extra weight and that is meant to support the idea that she is a homely, demure housewife who lives to serve her husband. She is so dedicated to her role, that she doesn’t even seem to notice when he is controlling and disrespectful to her. He forbids her from speaking with Nathaniel when he is punished by Mr. Underwood – which is not part of any healthy relationship I can think of. He bosses her around and doesn’t listen to her or take her seriously. I think this quote is a good example:

“When Mrs. Underwood brought her husband his lunch an hour later, she confided an anxiety with him.

‘I’m worried about the boy,’ she said. ‘He’s barely touched his sandwich. He’s flopped himself down at the table, white as a sheet. Like he’s been up all night. Something’s scared him or he’s sickening for something.’ She paused. ‘Dear?’

Mr. Underwood was inspecting the array of food upon his plate. ‘No mango chutney, Martha? You know I like it with my ham and salad.’

“We’ve run out, dear. So what do you think we should do?’

‘Buy some more. That’s obvious, isn’t it? Heavens above, woman—’

‘About the boy.’”

At the end of this exchange, Mr. Underwood dismisses her concerns and tells her to send Nathaniel to him after lunch. The whole scene shows how little Mr. Underwood considers his wife and also how gentle and demure and dedicated she is despite his negligence toward anyone he considers less than him, like his wife and his apprentice. She serves to show the reader that Mr. Underwood isn’t a good person, and her physique fits her into this tropey kind of stereotype of the kind of woman you don’t really want to be, because as much as she is a good person, she is easily taken advantage of by the men around her and is ultimately a victim of her husband’s avarice and inattentiveness.

On the other hand, Sholto Pinn’s extra weight is used to show that he is a lazy and cruel man whose power gives him the freedom to be cruel to the spirits he controls. We get the image of a slave master whose power over others is embodied in his weight. The larger we envision him, the more powerful we perceive him to be – and the more distasteful. In this passage, Pinn returns to his shop to find his servant named Simpkin speaking with another spirit despite instructions to keep the store closed in his absence:

“The foliot’s eyes strayed behind me and he broke off with a sudden gasp. A shadow enveloped him, a broad one that swelled as it extended out across the polished floor…

‘Well, well, Simpkin,’ Sholto Pinn said, as he pushed shut the door with an ivory cane. ‘Entertaining a friend while I’m out, are we? While the cat’s away…”

‘N-n-no, master, not at all.’ The sniveling wretch was touching his forelock and bowing and retreating as best he could. His swollen head was visibly shriveling. What an exhibition. I stayed where I was, cool as a cucumber, leaning against the wall.

‘Not a friend?’ Sholto’s voice was low, rich, and rumbling; it somehow made you think of sunlight on age-blackened wood, of jars of beeswax polish and bottles of find red port. It was a good-humored voice, seemingly always on the cusp of breaking into a throaty chuckle. A smile played on his thin, wide lips, but the eyes above were cold and hard. Close up, he was even larger than I’d expected, a great white wall of a man. With his fur coat on, he might have been mistaken in bad light for a mammoth’s backside.”

The scene continues with Simpkin very nervously trying to avoid trouble and Sholto very clearly enjoying the emotional pain of his slave. His weight is used as a way to give his cruelty physical manifestation. Characters like these play into weight bias in which thinner people are viewed as attractive and benevolent people and heavier people are treated as less desirable, intelligent, competent, or kind.

I’ll also mention that Sholto Pinn is the only character that we might consider disabled because of his use of a cane. Because of that, we can also house his character under the Disabled Villain trope. There’s not much to say here, because we don’t know anything more about him, but I think it’s worth noting that the only character with a disability is one we are supposed to identify as evil.

THE HAPPY HOUSE SLAVE

Simpkin is also the embodiment of a particularly problematic trope. The Happy House Slave has been revisited many times. For readers of magical fantasies, the house elves in Harry Potter are a perfect example. They live to do their masters’ bidding, take great pride in their work, and are repulsed by the idea of freedom from bondage. In Harry Potter, it’s really not dealt with. Hermione’s discomfort with the bondage of house elves is treated as a joke. Even the good families like the Weasley’s find it perfectly normal and even wish that they had a house elf of their own. The only reason they don’t have one is that they’re too poor. Simpkin is much the same as a house elf. He likes being owned by powerful magicians and thinks that his master’s power and wealth give him higher status. He considers it a privilege to be owned by Pinn. I can’t even begin to explain exactly how problematic this trope is. Still today, we have school systems in the US teaching children that enslaved people in the United States benefitted from their enslavement and enjoyed working for the people who bought and sold them. Tropes like the Happy House Slave reinforce the idea that slavery isn’t all that bad. I haven’t read the next two books in this series, so I don’t know if there will be any commentary on slavery later in this trilogy, but this trope stands on its own as something that we really should know better than to make use of.

SLAVERY AS AN ACCEPTED PART OF SOCIETY

As I mentioned earlier, I’ve only read book one of this trilogy, so there may be more commentary on slavery later in this series. But in book one, slavery is an accepted part of magical society. The difference is that the enslaved beings are otherworldly spirits called into this world to serve magicians. Magicians actually do very little magic in this book. Their primary ability that sets them apart from non-magical people is the ability to call forth djinn and other kinds of otherworldly beings, force them to work for them, protect them, fight wars for them, etcetera. It’s not clear that non-magical, everyday people know that this is how magic works – it’s very probably that most of them don’t because they don’t have the specially designed eyeglasses and contact lenses that magicians do which allows them to see otherwise invisible spirits. I think what all of this does is serve to convince the reader that magicians are deeply corrupt, greedy, and power-hungry people who have to be overturned. But the argument that slavery is bad is weak. The only people fighting against the magicians are the Resistance, which uses stolen magical artifacts – which contain imprisoned spirits – to fight back, so as far as book one goes, the Resistance is fighting for lower caste humans, but not necessarily for the abolition of slavery.

The only character who has anything to say against slavery is Bartimaeus. I think readers are meant to identify with Bartimaeus. His sections of the book are written in first person and he’s the most dynamic character, but that doesn’t really make him likeable. He starts out witty, but his banter is really his main personality trait, and he doesn’t really grow beyond that. To me, sometimes the words he uses that are supposed to be funny are really just uncalled for. In the example that stands out the most to me, Bartimaeus has just stolen the Amulet of Samarkand for Nathaniel and is hiding from people who want to take it from him. He goes down an alley near Trafalgar Square to hide from a group of teens chasing him and takes the time to describe his pursuers to the reader. Here’s another excerpt:

“The girl wore a black leather jacket and trousers that flared wildly from the knees down. There was enough spare material there to make a second pair for a midget.”

The word midget isn’t one that anyone should be using. Our society tends not to treat slurs or derogatory language related to disability with the same severity as we treat other kinds of derogatory language, but I’ve been involved in the disability community in a variety of ways for a long time, and I can tell you, midget is not a word we should be using. And because Bartimaeus uses this kind of language as part of his entertainment value, I’m kind of put off of the character. So for a book that’s really built on the back of this character, it doesn’t really show any moral leanings one way or another.

SO, WHAT’S THE MESSAGE?

That said, books don’t have to impart messages around morality. The old cops and robbers movies were just the stories of one person’s goals versus another person’s goals. Before the introduction of the Hayes Code, lots of stories centered quote unquote, “bad guys,” with the intention of telling an interesting story or maybe showing the ways that the establishment creates crime through the law without morality at play.

Bartimaeus, as an anti-hero, fits into some of these older narratives. He’s unconventional, unattractive, a little ruthless, judgmental, and he feuds with other spirits that are just following the orders they are forced to follow. He’s a flawed protagonist in a world full of flawed humans and spirits. So, I don’t think we’re meant to see him as inherently good.

Nathaniel is the other character whose point of view we see as readers, and he’s obviously flawed as well. He’s greedy, vengeful, and selfish, and he doesn’t learn from his mistakes. He’s remorseful that Mrs. Underwood dies because of his actions, but in the end, he gets exactly what he wants – to become the apprentice of a new, powerful magician who recognizes his talents. Ultimately, he’s rewarded for his bad actions.

In a way, by writing these flawed characters, the author is showing us things that happen in the real world. Many powerful people get their way by taking advantage of people with less power. The richest people in the world got there by paying their employees so little that they can barely get by, and by overworking people to the point that we get stories like the ones that have come out of Amazon warehouses. I think that one of the things the author is hinting at is that power breeds corruption and abuse.

If you’re looking for lessons in this book for young adult readers, you have to look beyond the characters and study the world and how it operates. Magicians are cruel, greedy, and corrupt because they have power. People like Mrs. Underwood and Ms. Lutyens are kind because they have no power, and no understanding of the power magicians wield. Spirits are amoral because they’re just trying to survive in a system that treats them like property and they do whatever they can to survive, whether that is appease their masters, kill other spirits, or run away from trouble.

So, honestly, I was really looking forward to cracking open this book. It comes with a lot of accolades. It won a Best Books for Young Adults award from the American Library Association. It’s won a Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children’s Literature, Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire, a Costa Children’s Book Award, and The Reader’s Award. And I think it’s fair. It’s a fun read with plenty of hijinks and entertainment value. If you like fantasy books about wizards and magic, this is a fun read and I like that the author subverts the genre by making a mythical creature the main character rather than writing about mythical characters from the point of view of a human. I think that’s the thing I like most about this book. Most books that I’ve come across in this category make the human perspective the most important one, but this one turns the genre on its head by making the main character and the first-person narrative from the perspective of the Djinn. It’s like watching Haunted Mansion from the perspective of the ghosts. It’s a creative way to make the fantasy genre feel fresh and new and I actually really appreciate it for that.

That said, it still leans on some problematic tropes. Not every book has to be about representation, but considering how highly regarded this book is, I wish I saw fewer fat tropes and appropriation and in light of our current political climate in the US, I think the Happy House Slave is particularly troublesome. Now, the author is British, so tropes like that may not land with the same weight as it does where I live, but the fact that it leans on these kinds of tropes so heavily is disappointing for me.

So, like I said earlier, none of the problems I have with this book have anything to do with why it’s been banned and challenged. Was banning this book an overreaction? Probably. The Amulet of Samarkand certainly has its pros and cons. I can’t say my life has changed having read this book, but I am glad to see an author subverting the fantasy genre through the Bartimaeus character and I hope to see more authors doing this in the future.

Thanks for joining me for this video. You’ll be able to find links to my sources and to more about this book in the description below. Other things you can find in the description include the link to read the script from this video, the link to the Underground Bookshelf website and the link to my own book. You can also find the link to the Underground Bookshelf Patreon if you would like to support this project. You can be a Patron for $3 a month and patrons get an extra short story every month as a thank you. You can also support the project by picking up apparel from the merch store. The link for that is in the description as well. Of course, you can support this project for free by liking and subscribing, by following Underground Bookshelf on social media, reading the stories and using the resources on the website, watching our videos or by submitting your own short stories to be included in our collection.

Before signing off, my question for the comments is: What is your favorite book genre and why?

Thanks again, I’ll see you next time and remember, wherever you are, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, YOU BELONG.

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