*The Golem and the Jinni*

By Helene Wecker

Genres: Historical Fiction, Fantasy

Published: 2013

Rating: 5 out of 5 stars

*The Golem and the Jinni*, Helene Wecker’s debut novel, was a unique book that I really loved. I hardly ever read historical fiction, but this book isn’t just regular historical fiction; the two main characters of the book are mythical creatures. As bizarre as mythical beings in an otherwise completely realistic setting may seem, *The Golem and the Jinni* is actually an engaging read that drew me in from the first page.

In the year of 1899, a Prussian Jew named Otto Rotfeld goes to Yehudah Schaalman, a master of the darker Kabbalistic arts. Rotfeld wants Schaalman to make a clay golem as a wife for him. Schaalman obliges only with a hefty sum of money as the price. Later, Rotfeld sets sail from Poland to New York City with his newly made wife, but he dies on board the boat. His golem wife is disoriented when she arrives in the city alone. However, an elderly Jewish rabbi takes her in, naming her Chava, and teaches her how to live in the city.

Meanwhile, in Lower Manhattan, a Syrian tinsmith called Boutros Arbeely sets free a jinni by accident while fixing an old metal flask. The jinni had been trapped inside the flask for a thousand years, but he doesn’t remember how or why he got captured. Arbeely names the jinni Ahmad, although Ahmad himself is less than thrilled to realize that he is stuck, at least for now, as a jinni in human form. The jinni and the golem must make their separate ways through the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of New York City, until they meet each other one night.

Sounds like a pretty crazy plot, doesn’t it? Trust me, the author, Helene Wecker, pulls off the story quite well. Wecker writes her prose deftly and expressively. There is beautiful imagery of the different areas in New York City where the plot plays out. The author paints a vivid picture of societal norms in the early 1900s as well as the different cultures of New York City’s immigrant populations.

Adding on to the physical backdrop is a cast of colorful, varied characters that push the story forward. Each character has a personality that the author builds up credibly with their words and actions. As the main characters, Chava is caring and cautious while Ahmad is unrestrained and self-indulgent. These opposing traits make for entertaining dialogue and an interesting friendship that shows how one commonality between two people (or in this case, two mythical creatures) can be stronger than a million differences. The supporting characters have their own backstories too, each one revealing to the reader new understanding or empathy for the characters.

*The Golem and the Jinni* is a far cry from the modern world we live in today, but it still addresses universal topics like religion, conforming to society, romance, and the human condition. I could relate to the characters’ problems and emotions despite the fact that they live in an entirely different time period and two of them aren’t even human. *The Golem and the Jinni* is, in short, a fantastic story, and I definitely hope that Helene Wecker will write another book in the future.