



The Unfortunate Son

Constance Leeds

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Kidnapping, family secrets, and adventure on the high seas--perfect for middle grade fans of historical fiction!

What does it mean to be lucky? Luc doesn't really know. He was born with just one ear, his father constantly berates him, and his younger brother is already bigger and stronger than he is. But when he is chosen to become an apprentice to a local fisherman, his life takes a turn for the better. Luc is a natural at sea, and before long he and a teenaged girl who lives with the fisherman form a strong bond. That bond is tested when Luc is taken captive by a band of merciless pirates, and sold into slavery.

Moving from 1485 to 1500, from France to Africa, from humble beginnings to a noble future, this historical fiction adventure will leave readers pondering the true meaning of good fortune.

The Unfortunate Son Details

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Author : Constance Leeds

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From Reader Review The Unfortunate Son for online ebook

Jill Berry says

Engaging. I didn't want it to end. It was recommended by a student, a surprising choice from her. I wanted a sequel, but the author died shortly after it was published. More for middle school than elementary.

Kristin says

Check this review out and others on my blog: Get Real.

What a strange little story. The premise is odd enough for a children's book: historical fiction set in 16th Century France; a story about questionable parentage, kidnapping, the differences between Western culture and Northern African culture - it's all very unusual. I enjoy historical fiction, especially when it covers periods and topics in history that are not among the tired and well-trod (see the stuff by Karen Cushman). And, while this story was readable, it was disjointed, it seemed unsure of its audience and several plot lines were left baldly unfinished.

Luc is the unfortunate son of the title - born with one ear and a father who detests him. He finds respite with a village fisherman and his sister and their ward Beatrice. Luc begins to think he may be worth something as he grows into this new family and his new profession as a fisherman. But, one day while out on the water he is kidnapped by Northern African pirates, who sell him to a noble and wise master. This element is a bit too good to be true. Of all the master to be sold to, Luc winds up with the nice one among the bunch. While this master Salah is not perfect, I felt his benevolence was somewhat unearned.

I also had trouble believing in the character relationships. I read about scenes and actions but little was shown of the characters' internal thoughts. What drove their decisions? And readers have certain character beliefs drilled into their heads through so much of the story that it was frustrating when those things were turned on their head for reasons that were not properly drawn out previously. The cover of this book is also misleading. Woodcut is an unusual choice, though it's not eye catching. However, the main problem is that the reader is led to think this is a pirate story. It's not. The pirates make up a very small part of this book. This got a star from School Library Journal. I'm not sure why. This story also seemed to beg for a sequel. Several plot lines were left hanging. The story just died on the page. A frustrating read despite its readability.

Ms. Yingling says

Luc was born with only one ear in 16th century France, and his father is very displeased with him. Instead of working in the family olive groves, he decides to help out Pons and Mattie, an older brother and sister team who are raising a young noblelady, Beatrice, after the violent death of her father at the hands of a lord. The little make shift family does well for a time, until Pons and Luc are attacked by pirates while out fishing. While Pons survives, the news of Luc's disappearance is taken hard by the women in the family, although Luc's real family seem to be resigned to it. Luc is sold to a very educated man in North Africa, Salah, and while Salah's other servant, Bes, is very cruel to Luc, Salah himself works to educate Luc in the ways of healing. Luc wants to be home, but does learn much. Meanwhile, a secret surrounded Luc's birth, and more

information about Beatrice's family surfaces. This information drastically changes everyone's lives, and just might make it possible to get Luc back from slavery.

Strengths: Even though the description and cover made me loathe to pick this up, I was very quickly sucked into the story. All the characters were interesting, the glimpse into life in North Africa was fascinating, and the plot moved everyone quickly. This reminded me a little of Jacques' *The Angel's Command* for some reason, or maybe Jinks' *Pagan's Crusade*. I enjoyed it.

Weaknesses: This will be a hard sell, since it is an unusual time period.

Erin Reilly-Sanders says

This one is pretty enjoyable but at the same time, it seems to be lacking something important as well. It's a bit more of a historical adventure than historical fiction, perhaps along the lines of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, making it an enjoyable story but leaving lots of questions as to the historical realism parts. *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg* is definitely an adventure tale as well, but somehow seems seeped in recognizable historical setting and events even if events and notable people are minimized. I've seen this book referred to as historical fantasy and it does read like that with the bit of romantic quest, especially for a younger juvenile audience where love may be a bit more simple. It does seem to work out a bit too conveniently for typical historical fiction and since it lacks an actual author's note or bibliography discussing the factual setting, may not have actually been intended as historical fiction. I did find the parts in Northern Africa to be the most fascinating because they were describing a culture and place that I am unfamiliar with but also because they seemed less idealized than the tiny fishing village Luc longs to return to despite the knowledge and wealth of the Maghreb/Barbary Coast. The author's biography suggests a research trip to the area which may recommend these parts as more historically linked, especially with the introduction of what appear to be real personages. The story seems to be an interesting reversal of slavery and can be verified by research on the Barbary Pirates but this seems to be too simple to accept at face value, especially given Luc's unrealistically fortunate circumstances, so I would continue questioning this. Unfortunately that might also recommend this book only to older audiences and there may actually not be enough meat there to maintain a deep investigation. The other alternative is to just read this as a fun adventure with a bit of info about the Maghreb/Barbary Coast and just leave it at that. I think my students might have their work cut out for them in looking at this as historical fiction...

V.K. Finnish says

I give 3 stars to books I enjoyed while reading, but feel like I got everything out of it in one read.

The Unfortunate Son follows the stories of fifteen-year-old Luc and of fifteen-year-old Beatrice as they meet in their 15th century French village, become separated, and strive to be reunited.

Luc is known as "the boy with one ear", and though, some see him as nothing but a freak, he is welcomed into the home of an old fisherman and his sister and their beautiful adopted daughter Beatrice. There, he brings them good fortune until the day he's kidnapped by slavers. The rest of the story is dedicated to Luc's life as a slave, and Beatrice's attempts to find someone who will help bring Luc back.

The book draws fascinating images of fifteenth century life, and the adult characters are quirky and memorable. Though, the two main characters are a little too "perfect" to be interesting. One main flaw of the book is that all the young people are amazingly beautiful and good, and all the older people are...well...old.

With all its detailed descriptions of historical life, the *The Unfortunate Son* reads something like a Laura Ingalls Wilder book, and the adventure is slow, but interesting when it arrives. I admit, I was disappointed in the end--the author spent the entire book getting to the answer of "who is Luc?", then sprang another question at the end and left it hanging.

All in all, an enjoyable middle-grade read for those who like slow-paced adventure and history with a hint of romantic flavor.

The Rusty Key says

Reviewed by Rusty Key Writer Jordan B. Nielsen

Recommended for: Both boys and girls, ages 10 to 14, approximately, though demographic is easily this novel's greatest problem, see review for further thoughts on that subject.

One Word Summary: Equable.

The Unfortunate Son falls into a noble, if underappreciated genre of children's books: those that kids will only love when reread years later as an adult. Richly described, thoughtful, heartfelt and nuanced, there is just absolutely no way this book is going to fly with children.

Set predominantly in a picturesque fishing village in the south of France in 1486, The Unfortunate Son follows the entwined fates of two noble-born children growing up far from the plush lives that ought to have been endowed to them.

Beatrice was the daughter of a knight in the court of the Count de Muguet, a brutal Feudal lord who abhorred imperfection just as much as mercy. When Beatrice's father was accused of stealing from the Count to cover his gambling debts, Muguet was more than happy to have the man's head lopped off in the public square, right in front of his then eight-year-old daughter, before any of the claims could be proven. Beatrice's mother escaped to a nunnery and the little girl was whisked away by her doting nursemaid, Mattie, to the humble seaside cottage of the woman's brother, Pons.

Luc, the titular unfortunate son, indeed had the great misfortunes of being born to the monstrous Count himself, and being born with only one ear. Outraged by the deformity, the Count foisted the boy onto one of his grooms and set him and his wife up with a little olive grove (unbeknownst to him, in the same fishing village to which Mattie and Beatrice fled) for their troubles. Luc grew up believing himself to be the son of these dejected farmers who came to deeply resent the boy for secret reasons, beyond the obvious, which I won't spoil.

Beatrice and Luc are joined when, tired of having him around all the time, Luc's surrogate parents send the boy to their neighbors, Pons and

Mattie, to become an apprentice fisherman. Pons is getting on in years and can't quite handle the nets on his own anymore, but Luc proves to be a quick learner and takes to the trade like a duck to water. Strong, affable

and handy, Luc becomes a cherished member of the family, as it were, and though Luc and Beatrice squabble and poke at each other like brother and sister, neither's charms are lost on the other.

But just when Luc has finally found a little love and stability, all is cast to the wind. One afternoon when Pons and Luc are out fishing, a black smudge appears on the horizon. The old man orders Luc to the oars, but there is nothing the boy can do to outpace the ship that bears down upon them, containing a band of Saracen pirates. Luc is taken prisoner aboard the ship where he endures terrible, dehumanizing conditions before arriving in North Africa where he is sold as a slave. Pons returns to the village to tell the tale to the horror-struck Mattie and Beatrice. What can a few peasants of little means possibly do to rescue the boy from points unknown when they don't even know if he is still alive? What awaits Luc in his new life as a slave in the Arabian world? Will he ever go home again?

The old saying about not judging books by their covers may work when interpretively applied to non-book related situations, but when it comes to actual books, I can't help it. When I picked up *Son*, with its tense cover image of a wooden ship on a roiling ocean, swarthy buccaneers hanging from the bows, the back cover emblazoned with "Captured by Pirates!" in a shade of dried blood, what I was expecting was a swashbuckling adventure on the high seas. What I got was a lot of scenes of an old French woman sitting on a bench, whittling wood. That's not a metaphor. *Son* is a lovely, deeply informed story, packed with well-researched historical detail, sitting right at the intersection of *The Odyssey* and *Otto of the Silver Hand*. And like *Otto* and *Odyssey*, it will take kids a more mature second reading of this book, which they will likely be assigned to read in school at some point, to fully appreciate its slow-paced tenderness.

Leeds' prose is just like the Provencal soups she so lovingly describes: simple, composed of few ingredients, yet wholly transporting. I was in that little stone cottage with Mattie, Pons, Luc and Beatrice at the end of their long day, sipping broth by the fire. I felt the heat and the bustle of the bazaar in Tunis as Luc trod the streets in chains. But for all her skill, it's clear that Leeds' intent is to inform and prompt, rather than to entertain. The young reader in me desperately wanted to see Beatrice run out in the night, charm a rowdy band of merchants into conveying her across the Mediterranean and, sword in hand, rescue her stolen friend, however improbable that may have been. But Leeds sticks to her history, and thus Beatrice is just as powerless as a young girl of her time period would have been. The author is positively allergic to cinematic action, overwrought emotion, and easy, black and white moralism, which is all well and good for the sophisticated reader, but not a lot of fun for the targeted age group.

And exactly what that age group is is truly hard to define. The debasement that Luc suffers on the Saracen ship is quite disturbing and pushes the age range of this story deep into middle grade territory, but the charms and soft touches that Leeds adds, like Mattie's fish carvings and the child-like joy that they are meant to provoke seem suited to an audience who would be too young for the darker content of the story, or the intellectual arguments put forward by Luc's enslavement.

To be sure *Son* is deserving of an audience. While Leeds' scenes of digging for cockles in the chilly, lavender and salt scented sea breezes of the Cote D'Azure are the stuff of my tired cosmopolitan adult dreams, I don't think those who haven't endured the woes of a soul-bleaching commute will be able to savor them with the same reverie. Fifteen years from now there will probably be a whole generation of twenty-somethings who find this book at the bottom of a box of their old things from 5th grade, and fondly rediscover that book that once bored them to tears.

For more reviews, author interviews, reading lists and articles from The Rusty Key, visit us at www.therustykey.com

Amanda says

There will be spoilers in this review.

I enjoyed this story for the most part but looking at it critically I have several issues. Salah is supposed to be one of the most well traveled and well educated men in all the world. Versed in philosophy, medicine, astronomy as well as many other things yet all the way to the end of his life he strongly believes in slavery and mocks Luc for remembering his life among the "infidels" before he was a slave. I find it a difficult pill to swallow in a children's book that one of the messages I feel is conveyed is that as long as you believe you are doing something that will better a person, the ends justify the means. Yes, Luc can read and write and speak another language after he was stolen into slavery but does that mean his life was not of value before? Salah thinks so and in the end I believe Luc believes so as well. Luc equates the fact that because now he wants something different out of life than to be a fisherman, it was ok that he was kidnapped and sold.

I also took issue with the fact that Salah KNOWS Bes is mistreating Luc the entire time and justifies the behavior because Bes felt his place in the household was threatened.

This story is as much about Beatrice as Luc and I did not have issue with her story until the last few pages. When Beatrice goes to the castle and all is revealed I was left with uncomfortable questions. Clearly the Count was half in love with Beatrice and knew she cared for Luc. How is this going to work now that Luc is back and better than ever?

I really did like the story. Reading this story or recommending it to a middle school child gives me pause unless I think they are able to think critically enough to evaluate all aspects of the book, including the fact that they do not portray slavery in a poor light at all.

Rachel says

Although the consensus seems to be that a more fitting title would be *The Unfortunate Cover*, don't let the front of the book prevent you from reading it. It. Is. Awesome.

Luc seems like the unluckiest guy of the century (16th century, that is). Born with one ear to a count who doesn't want him, he grows up in an olive grove thinking the drunk, hateful man raising him is his real father. When he is apprenticed to an old fisherman named Pons and lives with Pons, his sister Mattie, and their beautiful surrogate daughter Beatrice, Luc thinks his luck might finally be changing. Along with his dog Cadeau, they all live on the coast in a charming cottage filled with Mattie's whimsical wooden carvings. But one day while fishing Luc is captured by pirates and sold as a slave to a master in Tunisia. Is it possible that this could be the best luck of his life?

When Luc is kidnapped, the story splits into two strands, alternating between Luc's journey and the lives of Beatrice, Mattie, and Pons. Beatrice has her own twisted family history, and she begins to see that her story and Luc's may be more intertwined than she ever realized. Can she convince someone with money and power to take on the costly search for Luc? Will their paths bring them back together?

This one is a page-turner. My favorite parts were reading about Luc's life in his master's house in Tunisia.

And the ending is fabulous - it leaves a lot to your imagination. If you like historical fiction, especially Karen Cushman's books, you've got to make this your next pick.

Wendy says

In judging this by its cover, I didn't want to read it. I expected something swashbuckly, lots of holding-the-knife-in-his-teeth, followed by lots of honor and justice, ad nauseum. But actually I enjoyed this very much and read it in one sitting. The fifteenth-century France and Tunisian settings are lovely, and the characters--especially the middle-aged brother and sister coastal French fishermen--are all charming. The over-the-top elements of cruel nobility that are sort of Princess Bridesque interested me less. The Muslim physician was interesting and funny.

I don't think this is the "boy book" the cover tries to pull off, but it's very good all the same. I thought it was very like the Attolia books (of which, again, I've only read the last volume technically) but without the fantasy element.

Ryan Cooper says

The nobility plot line didn't fit perfectly with the main story, but the main story is great.

Donalyn says

I enjoyed this book, but I was dissatisfied with parts of it. Several times, the dialogue pulled me out of the story because it seemed too modern for the Middle Ages. Does the phrase, "Bloom where you are planted" date back this far? The cover is unfortunate-- implying that it's a pirate adventure, which it isn't. The blurb indicates this is a middle grade novel, but repeated references to bastards and eunuchs, historical references without context, and the romance storyline move it more toward YA, in my opinion.

The writing is superb and readers will connect to the characters.

Barbara says

This is an engaging page-turner that is likely to make readers ponder luck. All the events that befall the main character might seem to be misfortunes, but when taken together, they all lead him exactly where he needs to be. Without all those bad events, it's unlikely that the truth about his lineage would ever have been revealed, and a happy ending written. The writing in this book that is set in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century France is engaging and filled with lovely descriptions of its setting and its likeable characters.

When Luc is born with only one ear, his father will have nothing to do with him. The boy ends up being raised by peasants who make their living through an olive grove. For reasons revealed later in the book, the man Luc thinks is his father is verbally and physically abusive, and his wife is helpless to intercede or to cope with his alcoholism. Luc eventually finds a more welcoming home with Pons, a fisherman, and his

sister Mattie, who is a skilled wood carver. They share their home with Beatrice, the daughter of a disgraced knight. Just when things seem to be taking a turn for the better, Luc is kidnapped by pirates, and sold as a slave to Salah, a wealthy scholar who teaches Luc Arabic, medical skills, and encourages him to view the world differently. Luc is plagued by Bes, whose jealousy over Luc's relationship with Salah causes him to mistreat Luc. Beatrice refused to believe that Luc is gone forever, and once the possibility of his noble origins is raised, she relentlessly presses Louis, Luc's brother, to search for him. Even while Louis remains convinced that the search is pointless and he has no living brother, he still spends the money while also trying to make up for his own father's injustices.

In many ways, this book reminds me of *The False Prince* with its similar theme of mistaken or hidden identities and all manner of adventures. Given the nature of the count, though, I have to wonder why he didn't simply kill Luc in the first place. Of course, then there would have been no story, and both Luc and the book's readers truly would have been unfortunate.

Kim McGee says

Luc was born into nobility but as luck would have it, he was born with only one ear to a count that despised imperfection. Because of his missing ear he is given to the family of an olive grower and their son took the place of the count's dead infant son. His new family is not very kind to him so he decides to join an old fisherman, the fisherman's sister and their young ward Beatrice and become a fisherman. Beatrice and Luc become friends and are devoted to one another until luck again messes with their lives and Luc is pirated away and sold as a slave in Africa. His new Arabic master is a kind physician and teaches him much but even then he still wants to go home to his family. Beatrice has not given up on him either and continues to look for him and his true roots. Part fairy tale, adventure and historical fiction *The Unfortunate Son* will have you feeling like fortune has smiled on you to have found it.

Shazzer says

As posted on

Barb Middleton says

If you want to see a masterful creation of a historical setting with details galore, this book is a must. From describing how olives are harvested to making blood sausage to stitching a serious facial wound, Constant Leeds weaves nonfiction details throughout this book that are brilliant, fascinating and informative. She also does a stunning job presenting another culture in the 16th century. The message of tolerance between Muslims and Christians is one that I do not often see in children's literature. This isn't the author's main point and is not touched on until the end of the book, but I love how she weaves it in the storyline. Ignore the unfortunate cover on this book... it isn't a pirate story. I found myself wanting to skim ahead to get to the pirates, but Luc isn't taken until page 91, and his kidnapping is short; it is really a story about family, being a slave with no freedom, the power of knowledge or education, and forgiving those who have wronged you.

Luc's father hates him and is a mean, verbally abusive drunk. His mom's personality has shriveled so that she "no longer sings" like she once did. The two younger brothers adore 15-year-old Luc and are puzzled by

their father's anger. The prologue gives the reader an idea why the parents are a mess but the details are not clear. When Luc's situation becomes unbearable he becomes apprenticed to a kind fisherman in the village away from his home. Whereas, his father calls him a "curse," the fisherman calls him "lucky." This new family of Luc's consists of the fisherman, Pons; his sister, Mattie; and 15-year-old Beatrice, who they raised as a child. Life here could not be more opposite than his previous one. Tranquility and joy dance across the floorboards and Luc soaks it up like a sponge. When pirates capture him and sell him as a slave in Tunisia, Luc is purchased by a great scholar who educates him. Luc's new family is devastated and Beatrice will go to extremes to try and find him. Meanwhile Luc adjusts to his new life and the kind scholar, but struggles with being enslaved. Can he forgive those who have hurt him?

The beginning of the book's pacing is slow but the last half picks up speed. The domestic scenes are solidly established and this serves well at the end when Beatrice is so insistent to keep looking for Luc. There is the hint that she is in love with him and he with her. They never blurt anything out loud to each other, but do show an interest in each other. I felt removed from the characters in the beginning and restless with the pacing. The details were so overpowering that I didn't really connect with Luc. The reader meets all the different characters and I needed more of Luc's thoughts. In the second half, Luc shares more emotions and thoughts; plus his situation is full of tension and confusion. The pacing picks up and I was able to settle down. We are told from the beginning who Luc is from the prologue. I wished the author had not revealed this because it took the tension away. If she had left it out then I would have been wondering about Luc's parentage. I think she could have played up the Pascal, Sir Guy, and Count angle to keep the reader guessing. The irony of Salah wanting Luc to find freedom in knowledge and learn to accept his slave status is ripe ground for discussions.

The theme of forgiveness touches on so many characters and how they deal with this is another great topic that rests on fertile ground. Pascal and Blanche can't forgive and it eats them up. Beatrice learns to forgive but it is a slow process. Salah must ask for forgiveness for not telling the truth. Luc must forgive those who have been cruel to him, Pons must forgive himself for losing Luc, and Louis must forgive his father for all the people he murdered. Through forgiveness, we learn, hope springs forth.

I find it interesting observing how different authors handle characters going to another country and learn a different language. Oftentimes, they make them fluent too quickly. Leeds has Luc learning the language in two years. He's gifted and brilliant so I can buy that and he's completely immersed in the language. I like how she says that Salah would give him one word at a time to learn and thought she tried to show him slowly learning it. I did raise my eyebrows that he could read Sinbad out loud to Salah, but at least she puts at toward the end of two years. Maybe it was an abridged version versus the adult version of Arabian Nights. It is really difficult becoming a fluent reader - that comes later in second language acquisition - and Luc being a slave made it somewhat unbelievable. Not that it matters. What's more important in that scene is that he is showing that he loves Salah and is grateful for him giving him the gift of education.

I have spent 8 years living overseas and it is strange being illiterate in one culture and literate in another. I do think Constance Leeds captures this dynamic well with Luc when he first arrives in Africa. I could easily see Luc ignoring Bes and his constant insults because Bes is speaking in Arabic. I have done this before when I know someone is mad at me and they are spitting out words I don't understand in a different language. It is much easier to stay calm because I can't understand what they are saying. Plus, as Leeds explains, Luc just ignored Bes like he had to ignore his abusive father for years. I don't think Bes would have left Africa and gone to Europe with Luc or given him his pearls. I like the touch, but Bes was too small-minded, nasty, and self-centered. I think I needed him more fleshed out as a character for that to happen.

A twist is thrown in at the end that made me wonder if the author plans on a sequel. If you are a patient reader, like nonfiction, and good-writing you will love this book.

Reading Level 6.7
