



At the Sign of the Sugared Plum

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It is 1665 and Hannah is full of excitement at the prospect of her first trip to London. She is going to help her sister, Sarah, in her candy shop, 'The Sugared Plum'. But Hannah does not get the welcoming reception she expected from her sister, because the Plague is taking hold of London. However, Hannah is determined to stay and together the two young women face the worst-with the possibility of their own demise, growing ever closer. But through it all they persevere with the support of their neighbors and each other. And at last, they find hope in a daring attempt to escape the city.

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum Details

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From Reader Review At the Sign of the Sugared Plum for online ebook

Miriam says

I loved this book as a young teenager, and I still enjoyed it as an adult. Of course many of the themes are simplified for a younger audience, but Mary Hooper still does a good job of portraying the slowly growing dread and the willful blindness of the Londoners as the plague approaches. I still liked the protagonist, as well as the characters surrounding her.

Lisa Vegan says

I do love plague stories, and historical fiction stories, and coming of age stories, and I'm interested in the history of medicine, and there was quite a bit of all of those in this novel. I was particularly intrigued with the plague remedies and theories of the time.

There were particularly good descriptions of what London was like at the time (1665) and what the plague must have been like. I gradually grew to care deeply for the characters. Reading about the human suffering was palpable and heartbreakin, and the fate of the animals, was also sad, and infuriating given the ramifications.

The narrator, using language appropriate for the era, was a good storyteller, for the most part. There was real suspense; the horror really builds and definitely held my attention.

At the beginning of every chapter, each covering a week's time, there is a quote, most about the plague, taken from Pepy's Diary. They nicely set up each chapter's part of the story.

At the end there is a glossary, which I wish had been at the front of the book, as there were a few words I hadn't known. Also included in the back is a section: Notes on London's Plague, 1665. There are also Recipes from the Seventeenth Century (all but one of them vegan and the one containing eggs easily made vegan) for: Sugared plums, Sugared orange peel, Candied angelica, Marchpane fruits, Frosted rose petals.

This is a very fast read. In some ways I wish it had had more depth, such as what I experienced when reading Connie Willis's adult novel Doomsday Book, but in this children's/young adult novel some things are included that I haven't read elsewhere so I very much appreciated this book's story too. I'd say those nine or ten and up could appreciate this book, though it does have just a bit of adult subject matter on the side, not as part of the main story, but some might consider this more appropriate for young adults than for children.

It's also a wonderful sister story, as the two main characters are sisters struggling to survive the bubonic plague outbreak. There are other memorable characters as well but the sisters are central.

I read this for the Children's Books group. It's the February selection for its Fiction Book Club, one of four book clubs (I can think of) in this group. This book had been on my to-read shelf and I'm very grateful it was a group selection because I got motivated to finally read it.

4 1/2 stars

Note: I see this is listed as a first book in a series so I'm hoping that means there will be sequels!

Rebecca says

Teenaged Hannah has lived all her life in the English countryside, so she is thrilled when, in the summer of 1665, her older sister Sarah invites her to come live with her in London and help her at her candy shop. However, arriving in London she finds Sarah had sent a second letter instructing her not to come. Plague has taken hold in London, and Sarah fears for Hannah's life. Hannah insists on staying, believing she will be safe. But to her horror, in the coming weeks more and more people die, and the sickness becomes an epidemic. Hannah finds herself living every day in fear that she will catch the Plague and die from it, for there is little hope of surviving it, and no way of leaving the city to escape.

I recommend this book to readers who like historical fiction and are interested in this time period. It brings to life the daily life of people in the 17th century and the horrors of living in London during the Great Plague. The historical details were fascinating and I learned a lot from reading the book.

Nicola says

I really liked this one. It follows the story of a young girl, Hannah, who moves to London in 1665, just as the plague is taking hold of the city. Hannah and her sister Sarah are both fun and witty characters with a close relationship. They were easy to relate to and easy to care about. The book itself was compelling and the whole time I was very eager to find out how things would end. The book is also obviously very well researched which added to my enjoyment and appreciation of it.

Josephine (Jo) says

This was a beautifully written book aimed at teens or young adults but just as informative for the adult reader. The subject of the great plague of London is sensitively covered without leaving out the horrors suffered by the people and the awful fear of those living in the city at the time. Seeing it all from the perspective of Hannah, a young girl from the country who has just arrived in London impatient to see all the wonders of the great city. It is such a shock for Hannah and her sister Sarah with whom she has come to live and work in Sarah's confectionary shop, the reader becomes drawn into the daily fear of wondering who will be taken next, the numbers of deaths rise every day by thousands at a time and there is little that anyone can do to protect themselves against the pestilence.

A great read for all ages.

Vee ?Under Mountain Books? says

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum is a very quick read about a young girl's experiences in London, during the Plague. It's told in the usual Mary Hooper fashion, a lot of attention to detail with a very rich, vivid storyline and a very likeable heroine.

Hannah did annoy me at first because she was a very stereotypical, 'fresh from the country' girl, she's very naive and the only things on her mind are getting rid of her freckles and the latest fashions. However, after seeing all the horrors of the Plague - Plague pits, dead and dying lying in the street and being trapped in London - only people with signed papers stating they're healthy can leave, and they aren't cheap - Hannah starts to see how the world really is and she starts to be more like her sister, despite still having a weakness for the latest fashions!

The cover is an eye-catching one too - if you look closely at Hannah's eye you can see a skull in it, which I find pretty creepy! There's also a newspaper style background with larger words like 'Plague' and 'Prayers' really standing out. It's a brilliant cover.

As I said, the storytelling is magical. There's enough gruesome detail to really get a picture of what it was like there (I swear I smelt a house full of rotting bodies at one point) but not so much that you'd want to hide it from your 13 year old sister. A perfect balance really!

I would have liked the book to have been longer so we could have found out what happened afterwards with some of the characters and I'm not sure why this wasn't done, after all, the book is only 163 pages long so another chapter shouldn't have hurt?

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Virginia Messina says

Wonderful historical novel for kids. Two sisters earn their living making confections in London as the Bubonic Plague of 1665 descends on the city. Great historical detail. You really can't beat the Bubonic Plague when it comes to fascinating disasters, and this story was especially good. The ending left an opening for a sequel, I thought. (I hope!)

Terri Lynn says

In June of 1665, teenaged Hannah is delighted to finally be going to London to live with her older sister Sarah who owns and runs a sweets shop The Sugared Plum. She wants to live in the city and throw away the country lifestyle that bored her in exchange for the excitement of keeping up with the latest fashions, attending her first play, and finding an interesting man to spend time with.

Sarah is horrified when she arrives. She had sent a note to her that Hannah never received warning her of the bubonic plague's arrival in London. Hannah is happy when Sarah lets her stay. She loves learning to make the delicate candied roses, violets, and other sweetmeats and also getting to look at the fashions of the rich ladies in town. Sarah gets her some nice new clothes, she finds her good friend Abby who is serving as a maid in a fine household, and she even finds her interesting man in the form of the apothecary's apprentice Tom.

Unfortunately, the plague spreads like a wildfire and soon people are dying in droves. This book offers rich authentic historical details on what it would be like to smell, see, and feel the horrors as they unfold. In the end, they must act in desperation to flee to the country and save a baby despite orders that no one may leave

the plague-ridden city. Will they make it? Read and find out.

I really enjoyed this book and the way the author includes so many small details to make the story a fascinating window into a summer long ago through the eyes of one young girl who experienced it. I found it especially interesting to see the misconceptions that people had about what caused bubonic plague and the various means they took to avoid catching it or to treat it as well as what happened to entire households once one member caught it. The author makes it very easy to picture yourself there. I very much liked the characters of Hannah, Sarah, Tom, Abby, and the apothecary. The book is labeled as "juvenile fiction" but I care nothing for labels, only for good stories and this is a good story worth reading.

Hannah Rose says

This book is beyond memorable. I recall reading this book as I was just curious if there were any books with characters as the same name as me. Put the name "Hannah" into the search engine at my middle school library and "At the Sign of the Sugared Plum" came up as one of the results. This book is enticing, magical, and one of the best historical fiction novels I have ever read. I mean, here I am, 24 years old and I have always loved this book. Truly a captivating classic!

Kruemi says

I learned more about the fashion in 1665 than I ever wanted to know and almost gave up when the 50th (at least it felt that much) dress was described. The story itself was pretty meagre and predictable - so what was it that kept me reading? Just the historical facts and because I like to read about London, no matter the century. But if I want to read about how an epidemic spreads and how it affects human nature I will always prefer The Plague by Albert Camus (not that you can compare both books in any way apart from the same illness that terrorizes people). I really wonder if any teenager (because it's a YA book) reads *At the sign of the Sugard Plum* after they encounter the detailed description of the third dress on page 5... figuratively spoken.

No recommendation from me.

Dawn (& Ron) says

This book was recommended to me late last year by Lisa. My first thoughts were someone wrote a YA book about the Great Plague and made it interesting! It just seemed a difficult match to me, to make such a bleak subject work for this genre. It could easily turn into an anachronistic tale of a 21st century lass who flits into 17th century London to view events. So my interest immediately piqued, I had to see how this would be treated and made palatable for younger readers, be able to hold my attention, and see if this was a book that would work for the reading club I have with my niece.

Pretty quickly Mary Hooper grabbed my attention. How she managed to walk that fine line and keep this from being maudlin and heavy or modern girl at the Great Plague, is the magic that draws you in. Immediately Hooper infused her narrative with such vitality, enthusiasm, humor and joy, even the blush and bloom of first love. You know the plague is there, like some scary monster hiding just out of sight, but life still goes on in London and for our heroine, Hannah. The mundane flow of city life is maintained for as long

possible, the basic duties of going to market, the simple joy of a pet kitten and the comforting sound of the town crier's nightly calls -

"Twelve o'clock Look well to your lock, Your fire and your light And so good-night!"

Slowly and subtly these things start to change, hearing of a death, a house or two being shut up (a mind numbing horror for the occupants), building to the life changing occurrences of watching the death carts rumbling by in the night and the graveyards running out of room for the bodies. Hooper gives all this a palpable feel as the plague's hold on London grows.

"That night I had a terrible nightmare. I was alive, but lying in a plague pit under a press of bodies which weighed down on me so that I could neither move nor hardly breathe."

I quickly came under Hannah's spell, experiencing her excitement at coming to the big city, still carrying her country girl views, but so not wanting to be seen as that country girl. She's coming to help her sister, Sarah, run her sweetmeats shop but she has oh so many more things she wants to do now that she is finally in London. Sarah is much more reserved as the older sister and not as fleshed out as Hannah is. This almost seems to be intentional on the author's part, since it is in Sarah's nature to step aside and let Hannah shine. Sarah excels as a business owner, showing one of the few opportunities afforded a single woman to better herself. She's smart, savvy and serious about her shop, it's not just a stepping stone to finding a man. The scenes of the sisters working together to prepare their sweet delicacies almost make you feel as if you need to brush the sugar and spices off your own fingers. As a fun bonus, vintage 17th century recipes of some of these same delectable sweets are included, just be glad you don't have to go through the same exact process as Hannah and Sarah. As the plague's threat closes in, it is nice to see them pull together as sisters, you can only hope and wonder will they be able to escape its grasp.

The plague is not glossed over nor is it exaggerated for affect, it is handled in a matter of fact, forthright manner. The horrifying affects of the disease on its victims and the city leave you with some scenes that are heart breaking, such as the scene of a young neighborhood boy running naked from his sealed up home, leave you shaking your head. Despite knowing this happened almost 350 years ago, I was still struck by the utter chaos and ignorance in fighting the disease and especially the naïve beliefs and cures. All you had to do was say that something was beneficial in preventing the plague and you could sell it as a plague preventative or cure, this sadly is something still with us today.

"Comfits for corpses. The thought came to me unbidden and I quickly brushed it aside."

As an animal lover, the fate of the domesticated animals was difficult to read and learning that the measures used probably only helped to spread the disease instead of curb it, made it more so. Somehow Hooper made it feel like the plague was a living character, an alien presence out to annihilate the human race. She does an amazing job conveying the fear, panic and sorrow especially juxtaposed with the sisters living life, running their shop and making their sweetmeats.

An author's note helps put an exclamation point on some of the facts and issues mentioned and really needs to be read to gain a better appreciation for the novel. A glossary is also provided along with the 17th century recipes of several of the sweetmeats made by Hannah and Sarah.

I'm not sure about the ending or the plausibility, it did feel a little too convenient and neatly tied up to me, but during that kind of catastrophe it is certainly possible. Overall my original surprise and concerns were happily extinguished and I'm very glad I got the recommendation. Mary Hooper *was* able to write an entertaining and thought provoking read about the Great Plague for YA readers, that holds the attention of adults as well. I wouldn't recommend it to my 11 year old niece yet, she will have to wait a few more years, some of the scenes would probably be too disturbing. It would be a nice introduction to the plague for teenagers who have an interest in history or the time of Charles II and for adults who like an historical fiction from the point of view of the people and not royalty.

"A bumble-bee in a cow turd thinks himself a king."

G. Lawrence says

A fair read, but whilst I understand it is aimed at the young adult market, it felt somewhat immature, especially when the protagonists hear of deaths in the neighbourhood. The loveliest parts were the descriptions of the sweetmeats and their making. A fair, and fairly interesting read

Brett says

This book did an absolutely fantastic job of capturing the sights, sounds, & smells of plague-ridden London in 1665, as well as the feelings of overwhelming fear, helplessness, & despair it caused in the citizens. In this way it reminded me a great deal of Laurie Halse Anderson's "Fever, 1793", as well as the great protagonist. Hannah is so excited to be leaving her sleepy village for the bustle of London, where she has always dreamed of going. Arriving at the shop where her sister lives & works making & selling candies, however, she doesn't get the welcome she was expecting. Rumors that the plague has made a reappearance have everyone wanting to leave the city, but those unlucky enough not to be able to afford it have to stay & watch their city, & everyone in it, descend into madness as the disease takes hold & then intensifies. Hooper does a great job of describing the entire experience, which may make this not suitable for younger or squeamish children, but for those interested, it's a fantastic look at an interesting, if deeply troubled, time. Reading it in conjunction with "Fever, 1793" could be a good project.

Heather says

This was an interesting story which takes the reader back to London in 1665 where the plague is rampant. We watch Hannah change from a carefree, frivolous girl excited to be in the big city to that of a young woman troubled by nightmares of the real horror around her. At times the plot is a little thin, but it is still

definitely worth the read.

Kristy says

Hannah is a young girl from the country, ready to live it up in the big city. The city is London & the year is 1665. Hannah doesn't know it yet, but her time in the big city is going to be filled with misery, because the plague has just begun claiming victims.

I can't say I know too much about the plague, and I'm sure that the authors descriptions although sometimes graphic, were no where near as horrible as the sights people of that era actually took it. I found the book one part education & one part entertainment.

I think this is a young readers book, but I found I enjoyed it just the same. Would recommend to anyone willing to give historical fiction a chance... just don't expect anything other than a tale of a young girl & her sister trapped in a city crumbling around them.

Jae says

Mary Hooper describes the horrors of 17th century plague-ridden London. Through the eyes of a naive young country girl newly arrived in the city, we experience the growing sense of fear and dread as increasing numbers of people succumb to the terrifying disease.

At the back of the book are a few recipes for sweetmeats that were available in at that time.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Excellent historical novel about two sisters who struggle to survive the Great Plague of London in 1665. The author took her research from first-hand accounts, vividly bringing out the details of life and death at that time. The two sisters were candy makers, creating their confections from flowers and herbs, the details of which I found fascinating. Recipes for making some of these candies is included in the back of the book. This story is the first I've read by Mary Hooper, and it leaves me anxious to read more by her. Highly recommended!

Dorottya says

4.5

I really enjoyed this novel. I thought it was a perfect fit for its target audience (I would recommend it mostly for younger YA / older middle grade audience) and for the genre. It was obvious the author did her homework in researching the era, the history of London, the customs, the fashion, the lifestyle. I really like how the main heroine was credible and how she was not modernized to fit a current teen better - she was as naive, as sweet as a teen in her era would have been, especially coming from the countryside. I liked how she

had flaws and was not a picture perfect rebellious sjw type of character a lot of contemporary authors want to make their historical heroines to be.

I found the storyline to be really gripping and interesting as well, and I loved seeing how Hannah got more mature and wiser during this journey, during this first experience of hers being away from her parents and fending for herself for the first time, how she got from a ditzy little teen only caring for fashions and a cooler lifestyle to a mature young woman who is caring about other people more and taking more responsibility.

I am not sure about whether young adult-age readers 15 years ago were generally reading / expecting shorter stories, but I thought that the book could have been a bit longer and a bit more detailed. I was not missing anything per se from it, but I think I would have enjoyed it more with a little bit more description of the everyday life, maybe, or a little bit more plot.

Juliana Graham says

I enjoyed this book more than I expected and also learnt quite a lot from it. Set in London during the Great Plague, the novel follows the lives of two sisters who run a sweet shop in the city. In addition to being a good story there is also lots of historical background which I wasn't aware of. The sense of impending doom as the number of plague victims increases is palpable and there are some dark scenes and descriptions - quite impressive for what is I believe a YA novel.

Ayana says

AAAAAH I LOVED this book!!!! So much!!!! I couldn't stop reading it on the 8 hour plane! This story is historical fiction and it tells the story of the London plague beautifully. The basic plot is: Sarah, Hannah's sister, owns a sweet meat shop in London. For the summer, Hannah wants to go live with Sarah and help with her shop. Everything is going as planned.....UNTIL the plague hits London. Very very hard. Sarah and Hannah have to see everyone they know is pain, not knowing how to cure the plague- which was almost impossible at the time. They cannot leave London without a health certificate, which is extremely hard to get. So, they will just have to figure out how to navigate London without being visited by the Plague.
WARNING: BE PREPARED TO NOT SLEEP UNTIL YOU HAVE FINISHED THIS BOOK!!! :)
