



The Tzar's Curious Runaways

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Peter the Great of Russia collected in his Circus of Curiosities, dwarves, giants and people with deformities whom he used for entertainment, often with a great deal of cruelty. This is the background to this unusual story. Three very different members of this circus find themselves trying to escape after Peter dies and his Tzarina wants them killed. Katinka, a hunchback ballerina, Nikolai the dwarf with the beautiful voice, and Alexei the gentle giant, join together to evade their fate. Helped considerably the map drawn by Johann Daniel, the librarian, they start to make their way to the Ural mountains where Katinka has good memories of her home and parents. Their journey through the forests and then the steppes is beset by both animals and unfriendly people. But when they reach their journey's end, Katinka's memories are shattered.

This is, in essence a journey story, so where is Johann Daniel's map? Not many children will be familiar with the vastness of Russia or the inclement climate with winter coming on, and therefore it does seem to me a map is essential. Having said that this is an exciting story about three very different young people, both in their perceived disabilities but more interestingly in their personalities. Kat and Nikolai often misunderstand each other, and both are prone to anger quickly but Alexei is the calming influence between them, and gradually the two learn to respect each other. The extreme poverty of the people, the harshness of the climate and above all the cruelty of Peter are slowly revealed through the story. The heartrending moment when Kat meets the parents she remembered as having loved her, who then want to hand the three over to the Tzarina's guards, their perilous escape and the somewhat surprising ending, round up a very good and different story, set in a place and period of history with which not many children will be familiar.

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