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# Thornhill



## Synopsis

Parallel stories set in different times, one told in prose and one in pictures, converge as a girl unravels the mystery of the abandoned Thornhill Institute next door. 1982: Mary is a lonely orphan at the Thornhill Institute For Children at the very moment that it's shutting its doors. When her few friends are all adopted or re-homed and she's left to face a volatile bully alone, her revenge will have a lasting effect on the bully, on Mary, and on Thornhill itself. 2017: Ella has just moved to a new town where she knows no one. From her room on the top floor of her new home, she has a perfect view of the dilapidated, abandoned Thornhill Institute across the way, where she glimpses a girl in the window. Determined to befriend the girl and solidify the link between them, Ella resolves to unravel Thornhill's shadowy past. Told in alternating, interwoven plotlines—Mary's through intimate diary entries and Ella's in bold, striking art—Pam Smyth's Thornhill is a haunting exploration of human connection, filled with suspense.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Grade Level: 5 - 9

## Customer Reviews

"Atmospheric and emotional in an understated way... Beautiful, moody, sad, and spooky all at once."—Kirkus, starred review "All levels of readers—from reluctant readers to adults—will find themselves flying through these pages"—VOYA, starred review "This

British import is a stunner" – *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review "A chilling tale that highlights the importance of kindness and child advocacy while emphasizing the lasting damage wrought by abuse and neglect." – *Publishers Weekly*, starred review "Pam Smy has created a wonderful piece of work in *Thornhill*. The drawings are full of atmosphere, the words are full of tension and emotion all the more powerful for being so sparingly revealed. . . . A story of friendship and courage and of the power of black-and-white images. I think it's terrific." – Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy

Pam Smy studied Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, part of Anglia Ruskin University, where she now lectures part-time. Pam has illustrated books by Conan Doyle (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*), Julia Donaldson (*Follow the Swallow*) and Kathy Henderson (*Hush, Baby, Hush!*), among others. She lives in Cambridge.

This is a moody, compelling, and suspenseful piece, but it struck me as a bit different from what the descriptions and blurbs might suggest. Yes, there are two parallel, (if time separated), stories. POSSIBLE MILD PREMISE SPOILERS. We have 1982 Mary, an orphan inmate at Thornhill, and we have 2016 Ella, who has moved in to a house next to the now deserted and broken down Thornhill. Ella occasionally glimpses a girl in an upper window of the empty Thornhill building and undertakes to explore the grounds of Thornhill to unravel the mystery. Because the story moves back and forth between Mary's diary and Ella's investigations, we know much more about Mary, and much earlier, than does Ella. So, for most of the book we switch from the gripping continuing tale of Mary to drawings of Ella just walking around empty grounds. Ella doesn't really factor into the story until the very end. That's all fine, because Mary's story is gripping, suspenseful and dark. Ella is a bit of a tack-on. Since Ella's story is told through drawings, and since those drawings are of Thornhill, (albeit a derelict Thornhill), the drawings could just as well be accompanying Mary's story, which makes Ella even less important. BIGGER SPOILER. That's fine too, because Mary's story makes sense, while Ella's story's end, to me, comes out of nowhere, isn't a logical consequence of her development, and feels abrupt and unexplained. What most engaged me as a reader was Mary's descent into a certain form of vengeful madness. While a sympathetic character at the outset, Mary is not without flaws and weaknesses. The story is taken from Mary's diary, so she completely controls the narrative. A reader can read this book first from a sympathetic point of view, and then again from an untrusting and skeptical point of view, and end up with two very different Mary's and two very different reactions to the book's conclusion, (and that's both the 1982 conclusion and the

2016 conclusion involving Ella). The result is that you get that classic "Turn of the Screw" effect, where you can argue forever about who's the real ghost and who's the real evil force. God bless unreliable narrators. I'm not a big fan of psychological thrillers that coyly play hide and seek, or ghost stories that are just a few cries and whispers. Rather, here, this book had some meat on its bones, a ghastly mood that was sustained through both the narrative and the illustrations, and lots of tidy little bits that kept the reader guessing. To me, that adds up to a nice read, and this was a nice find. (Please note that I received a free advance will-self-destruct-in-x-days Adobe Digital copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

A grand Gothic graphic novel, this book is surprising and delightfully dark. The story is told in two parallel stories, one in images and one in text. Both stories take place in the same neighborhood and revolve around Thornhill, a home for orphans. Mary's story is told in text and is set in 1982 where she is one of the last children to leave Thornhill. As the other girls leave, Mary is left with a girl who has been bullying her for some time and the story builds to a terrible climax. The illustrated story is that of Ella in 2016 who has just moved to town and doesn't have any friends yet. She can see Thornhill, now disused and old, from her house. When she glimpses a girl there, she decides to figure out the story of Thornhill and the girl. This is the sort of story, you curl up with and read as fast as possible. Happily, Smyth's writing and illustrations make it almost impossible to leave this book behind for even a moment. The illustrations linger with the reader, haunting in their black and white details. The text invite readers into the past, showing them what being an orphan in was like before rules were put in place to protect children. There is a brilliance to not setting the history piece in the 1800s, but allowing shocking situations of a more modern time to surface. The art pieces in the book allow the reader to piece together that the girl being described in the text is not the one in the images quickly. The images are done only in black and white, filled often with deep shadows and lit by bright light at other times. They are dynamic and interesting, telling their own wordless story of Ella and her own losses. Get this into the hands of children who enjoy ghost stories, because this one will haunt readers. Appropriate for ages 9-12.

1.5/5 stars This book was darker than what I anticipated. The cover truly matches what goes on in the story. It felt like I was never going to be happy again. I'm just kidding. But this book is a lot more

serious than I what I expected. This was like A Series of Unfortunate Events without the humor. If you're into that, then consider reading this book. I just don't think a younger version of myself would actually enjoy reading this one. There's bullying and loneliness in this book, to the point that the victim doesn't even speak. She's afraid to speak out and no one is doing anything about it. There's child neglect and adults abandoning their job (like taking care of the children). The adults have no idea what was happening. At some point in the story, I was truly lost. I don't understand what was going on, despite the pictures. I liked the pictures and I think they add something to the story, since this story was confusing. The reason for this is that there are 2 main POVS. I think it would be a lot helpful, especially for young readers, if the names of the characters (and not the dates) were on every beginning of each chapter. I don't every young reader would be interested in reading the blurb of the book they're holding. The cover would be most attractive to young readers, especially in childrens books. While I do like the images within each chapter, I don't think this book is for me. I wouldn't recommend this story to children, instead I would recommend this book to teens who don't mind reading a gloomy type of story. To be honest, I still have a lot of questions unanswered. I didn't enjoy this story as much as I wanted to. It was difficult to follow along, and I can't help but think about the other children reading this book. Would they be able to follow the story as well? I'm not really sure.

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