



A Tale of Two Castles

Gail Carson Levine

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

A Tale of Two Castles

Gail Carson Levine

A Tale of Two Castles Gail Carson Levine

An enchanting tale of a girl who dreams of a home on the stage but finds refuge instead in a dragon's lair. Newbery Honor and New York Times bestselling author Gail Carson Levine delivers an engaging story of a spirited leading lady cast in the role of a lifetime!

Newly arrived in the town of Two Castles, twelve-year-old Elodie wants nothing more than to become an apprentice to a theater troupe. But alas, the troupe turns her away. The only one who offers to take her in is the brilliant dragon Meenore, who sells fire-roasted bread and cheese skewers and moonlights as a detective.

Elodie and Meenore's first case together concerns the town's shape-shifting ogre, Count Jonty Um. He is in grave danger: Someone wants him dead. Elodie disguises herself as a lowly kitchen maid in Count Jonty Um's castle to discover the villain. Everyone is a suspect-from the handsome cat trainer Master Thiel to kindly Goodwife Celeste-and not even Elodie escapes suspicion. Will she be able to find the culprit before it's too late?

Fans of *Ella Enchanted* and *Fairest* will delight in this rich fantasy about a remarkable heroine who finds friendship where she least expects it and discovers that goodness and evil come in all shapes and sizes. Kirkus Reviews gave a starred review to *A Tale of Two Castles*, calling it "a thoroughly delicious romp from the author of *Ella Enchanted*. The plot is winningly unpredictable, the characters easy to relate to, the humor subtle and the action well-paced."

Extras included in the paperback edition.

A Tale of Two Castles Details

Date : Published December 26th 2012 by HarperCollins (first published May 10th 2011)

ISBN : 9780061229671

Author : Gail Carson Levine

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Childrens, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Dragons, Mystery, Fairy Tales, Fiction

 [Download A Tale of Two Castles ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online A Tale of Two Castles ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online A Tale of Two Castles Gail Carson Levine

From Reader Review A Tale of Two Castles for online ebook

Miranda says

I had a hard time getting into *A Tale of Two Castles*. I'm not sure what it is--I LOVE Levine's books, in that I will gladly devour anything she releases, but this one just did not work for me for some reason. The writing seemed kind of jumbled at times, more focused on rushing through scenes so we could get more details on the setting. At times it honestly felt like more an exercise in world building than it did an actual fully realized novel. In the beginning the book throws a lot of terms and information at you and expects you to catch on quickly and follow along without trouble. I tend to prefer a book that slowly eases me into the world and introduces new concepts one at a time, not all at once. The world is very clearly realized, however, and once again Levine does a great job at creating a fantastical world.

I did like some of the characters. Elodie was cute, though not Levine's best heroine, and I was a little interested in her relationship with the dragon Meenore, but there wasn't as much focus on that once Elodie gets to the ogre's castle. The constant wondering and joking about whether or not Meenore was a male or female got old fast, though, as did the countless capitalized ITs in reference to Meenore. In the end, does Meenore's sex really matter? Elodie's reluctance and slowly building trust with the dragon was nice, and I did like how Meenore was a detective of sorts. It's not every day you read about a dragon that's a detective on the side. I think the character I liked most was Renn, actually, the daughter of the king that lives in the other castle and who is betrothed to the ogre. She was fun to read about, and I instantly latched on to her voice and personality.

Also of note was how Elodie's story ended. It was a good ending for her, I thought, and I do like how the story focuses more on her friendships with various people rather than a romantic relationship. I also could have never guessed the villain, though there were a few hints along the way that I missed. All in all I don't think this was Levine's best work, and I'm truly sorry that I don't think higher of it. It's kind of forgettable, really. There was nothing that really stuck out to me as being her usual greatness. It's charming at times, and I'm sure younger fans will enjoy it, but I think others should go for her retelling of *Snow White*, *Ever*, or the bind up of all her fantastic *Princess Tales*.

ARC received from NetGalley.

Ann says

AUDIOBOOK REVIEW

At not yet 14 Elodie (her exact age is a bit vague, probably 12 or 13) sets off from her beloved parents, brother and the small farming community from which she's lived to the city of Two Castles to seek an apprenticeship in mansioning (acting). But on the boat trip to Two Castles, Elodie learns that apprenticeships are no longer free, and Elodie, having no money to speak of, finds her dream dashed before she even reaches shore. How is a penniless girl from town to survive in a large city with dragons, ogres, and whiteseplecures (people who appear nice but are actually otherwise - and my apologies if this word is wrong, but I'm writing is as it sounded since I don't know the proper spelling).

And not knowing anyone in the city, how will Elodie know who to trust? Is the dragon to be as feared as it is? What about the ogre? He seems kind enough...

Without options, Elodie agrees to work for the dragon, who sends Elodie on a mission to the ogre's castle to

help him locate his (the ogre's) lost dog, but just as importantly to figure out who stole the dog and why. The dragon seems to think the ogre himself may be in mortal danger.

The dragon teaches Elodie how to reason, how to use common sense, to induce, deduce, to problem solve, and to tell the difference between fact and presumption. And Elodie is a likeable protagonist, confident without being cocky, humble without being weak, and clever without being annoying.

The other characters - and there are many - are delightful and intriguing, helped by the wonderful narration by Sarah Coomes (I adore her, what I think is, Scottish accent!).

The book is nicely detailed and the "whodunnit" mystery kept me guessing and did not disappoint. It's a great book for younger readers (or older readers) who want to read mysteries but aren't interested in grim or grisly murder mysteries. Plus, I really enjoyed the lessons that the dragon was trying to teach Elodie.

The only downside was that I did get a little confused from time to time as which sub-character was which. Many of them do not have names, but rather go by "The Count" or have multiple names, and it's hard to keep track of them all. Probably if one was reading (instead of listening to) the book it wouldn't have been as much of a problem.

I really enjoyed this tale and rather hope there's more to come!

Lynna says

I loved this book.

It's rather hard to tackle why I liked this book, so I'll make a list:

1. I once heard someone saying that spunky heroines as an archetype are getting old, and they're right. However, The way I see it, Elodie just seemed so much more than an archetype. Although its true she acted in many ways that are typical of young fantasy heroines (outspoken, brave, smart) these features just don't outweigh the other aspects of her personality, most notably, her love of acting and her vivid imagination. She reminds me of my day-dreamy self when I was her age. Oh, that's right. Her thoughts and feelings are that of a twelve year old. It's true that sometimes she acts a little older, but that makes sense because people had to grow up faster when times were harder. She hopes, she fears, and acts in a way that really makes her feel real. She also lacks the whiny and snarky aspect of many YA and some MG heroines, which is refreshing.(Note to YA authors everywhere: Strong female character≠ Spoiled brat)
2. The other characters. A major theme of this book is that you can't always judge people by their appearances, which is a really great theme for characters. Meenore was especially well-developed by the end of it. Not only the characters, actually, but the character interactions, which were very strong. Not only did the characters grow by the end of the book, but their relationships did, particularly Elodie and Meenore's.
3. Despite being written for a younger audience than Ella Enchanted and Fairest, this book has a lot more of a mature tone. While it keeps up the pace and flow, it does give a little more time to the quieter moments to give us time to think about the story. It also contains a lot more references to history, such as the structure of castles, boats, and the mention of apprenticeships. It also has much stronger world-building than some of her other books, with references to different fashions (and their variation from place to place, no less), the money system, hospitality traditions, proverbs, superstitions, accents, and stories (Some of which she borrowed from our world, by the way, but she did this in such a way that they sounded like they came from Elodie's world) It made the book seem far more realistic, and gave it a certain maturity that many MG books lack.

4.Fun. There were just so many things in this book, from the cats of Two Castles (The name of the city in the story, by the way) to the funny little details about the Dragons that I'd never seen before, and no, they weren't the kind of thing that is so new and unique you'd declare the book a masterpiece just for doing something different, but I really enjoyed them. In the hands of another author, they probably would have turned the book into an all-out comedy, but Levine didn't choose that path, so instead they add a light-hearted sense to the story without breaking the more mature part of its tone.

...That's all really I can think of for now. It's true that I haven't read the book in a while, but these reasons remain clear in my mind. Just to make sure, I'll read the book again soon, but I suspect I'll just remember more things I loved about it. I'd almost say I like this book the most out of all Mrs. Levine's books, but I'm loath to do that because I've loved the others for much longer.

Highly recommended. I know not everyone will love this books as I do, but I think more people should give it a try nonetheless. I admit, maybe they hit an internal cord within me, and that's the real reason I like them so much, but I still think it's very well written. I eagerly await the sequel.

Seanean says

<http://librarytalker.blogspot.com/201...>

At just twelve years old Elodie leaves home and sets off aboard ship to the town of Two Castles where she hopes to become a mansioner (actor). But fate has other plans for her. She instead becomes the assistant to the town dragon who is an expert in inductive and deductive reasoning. By paying close attention to her new masteress's teachings and to the world around her, can Elodie figure out who has betrayed the town ogre and poisoned the king?

Final thoughts: It's a short book talk because the book was just bland. Levine tried so hard to create this whole new world with new words and a new system of government and education that she completely overshot and made it boring. I struggled through this one and barely made it to the end. Honestly, I should have shelved this one after the first couple of chapters. I have really loved some of Levine's previous work, but this one was just not worth the read.

Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says

My only prior experience with Gail Carson Levine was *Ella Enchanted*, which, honestly, I did not like. I had seen the movie first and thought it was better (if not necessarily good). Still, I wanted to give Levine another chance because I know so many people who adore her books. Plus, I love fairy tales and she does tons of those.

A Tale of Two Castles fits into that mold; it is a revisionist, postmodern telling of *Puss in the Boots*. The ogre who can change into any animal is there, as is the miller's son who inherited no property and uses his cat to make money dishonestly. However, the good guys in the fairy tale are the bad guys here, and vice versa. The ogre is vulnerable to cats, peculiarly so. Apparently, cats wish so hard for him to become a mouse that he cannot help doing so. I think that's ridiculous, because if it works for cats, a whole bunch of people, if they could agree, ought to be able to wish him into a particular form as well.

Another thing that annoyed me about this story was its repetitiveness. There were certain words and concepts that Levine kept using, so much so that it rather felt like some sort of lesson intended to teach children the

meaning of terms like 'whited sepulchre.' A quirk of her fantasy world was that dragons were meant to be genderless, at least so far as humans are allowed to know, so they are to be called IT. Not It or it, IT. Ugh! The dragon's laugh also irritated me: 'enh enh enh.'

The dragon was still, perhaps, a better character than Elodie. She does not seem to have been very well conceived, as some of her traits are remarkably inconsistent. She begins as the starry-eyed arrival, a stupid farm girl, with no skill for anything but acting. She is trusting of people who, from my point of view, are obviously hiding something and mistrusting of those who only want to help her. The only scenes where I liked her at all were those where she mansioned (especially when she acted out Thisbe with an apple as her Pyramus).

The moment that would have made me throw the book across the room, if I weren't reading it as an e-book on my computer, was when suddenly Elodie, country bumpkin, knew everything about poisons ever: "I sniffed my bowl. The scent was faint but detectable: eastern wasp powder...The poison acted in an hour or two, caused chills, fever, tremors, a tight throat, death" (190). Really? There was no attempt at an explanation for why Elodie would ever know this.

Also awkward was Elodie's relationship with the ogre. She says that she loves him, but I'm not sure if this is supposed to be a friend love or a they're going to get married someday love. I also don't know how that would work and I have no idea how old he is. So, I was mostly just creeped out by the possibility.

A Tale of Two Castles had a lot of possibility, but was very poorly executed, with uneven characters, use of diction that felt like a vocabulary lesson, and unclear resolution.

Karissa says

Previously I had read Levine's book *Fairest* and really did not enjoy it. A number of people told me to give Levine another chance, so when I saw this book up at NetGalley.com I decided to give it a read. It was an okay book. While I liked it a little better than *Fairest* I still thought it was pretty boring, that the plot was over-simplified, and the characters very two-dimensional.

Elodie is twelve years old and is sent to the city to start her apprenticeship as a weaver. Of course Elodie has ideas of her own and instead of being a weaver wants to apprentice as a mansioneer. Things never go as planned and Elodie finds herself instead serving as an assistant to the brilliant dragon Meenore. Together Elodie and Meenore must solve the mystery of who is out to get the shapeshifting Ogre that is the lord of the castle.

More than anything this book is a mystery; the dragon and the ogre give some fantasy elements to the story but not much. Elodie is a plucky twelve year old who thinks she can do whatever she wants. She does a pretty good job of it, but comes across as a bit two-dimensional. Her story does not seem at all realistic and things tend to go her way more often than not. Elodie never dwells on the bad aspects of things that happen to her and doesn't seem to fully realize the implications of anything that happens to her. While this gives the book a positive feel; it also sends a false message that if you wander blindly into situations you will be rewarded.

The dragon Meenore starts off as a intriguing character but in the end doesn't have any more depth than Elodie. In fact all of the characters in this book seem to be more like character sketches than actual thinking, feeling characters. They are all a bit blah.

The plot is simplistic and the outcome easy to predict. None of the characters are ever in very dire situations and I didn't feel all that engaged in the story at any point in time. The writing style itself is also very simplistic: characterization, vocabulary, plot, and world-building are all kept to a minimum. This gives the book a very child-like feel.

Levine is trying to create a whole new world in this book, yet as the reader I had trouble grasping it. Some of the things added into the book made the world feel a bit contrived; like they were put in there just to make the world different and for no other reason than that. For example the characters always exchanging food and the way the characters (especially the princess) like to use "la" as a an exclamation. Things like that didn't really have a deeper purpose and didn't really add to the story.

The story ends well enough. It looks like there is potential for future adventures between Meenore and Elodie. The story is suitable for all ages; but seems targeted at a middle grade or younger audience because of the simplicity.

Overall the book was an okay read, but definitely nothing special. Everything about this story is boring and oversimplified. This could be a good read for young girls who are interested in mystery with a fantastical element to it.

Personally I think there are much more interesting, complex, and rewarding middle grade fantasy novels out there. Princess Ben is one that was better and has some meat to it, Princess Academy is another great read. For middle grade readers other series such as Fablehaven, Harry Potter, and Percy and the Olympians create wonderful worlds with complex characters that actually assume that middle grade readers can handle complexity. I will not be reading anything from Levine in the future; I have concluded that her writing style and me just don't get along.

Vinaya says

There is only one word to describe Gail Carson Levine's books, and that is 'charming'. The beauty of her writing lies in her ability to create enduringly endearing characters. And in Two Castles, she manages to weave her magic, yet again.

Strangely enough, although A Tale of Two Castles has a much younger protagonist than Ella Enchanted, I found the writing style in this book infinitely less juvenile. In Ella Enchanted, her prose is breathless and fast-paced. In Two Castles, her words have more gravity, and the pace is more ponderous. Two Castles is a book that adults will find as captivating as children and teenagers.

Elodie, the heroine, is a twelve-year old farm girl who sets off to the city of Two Castles to apprentice herself to the mansioners and realize her dream of becoming an actor. Alas for poor Elodie, the practice of offering free ten-year apprenticeships has just been abolished, and she discovers too late that she is too poor to pay for her apprenticeship. To add to her woes, her single copper is stolen almost as soon as she sets foot in the city. She is rescued from starvation by the dragon Meenore, who offers her a position as IT's assistant. (Dragons, being secretive about their sex, are always referred to as IT instead of him or her.) Elodie soon becomes embroiled in a plot against a hated ogre (with a heart of gold) and a search for the dreaded whited sepulcher, the outwardly beautiful person with evil in their heart.

Elodie comes off as being much older than twelve, a trend that is very common, I have noticed, in fantasy. However, it is an understandable concept for me, and one that I will not take issue with. With my great powers of "deduction, induction and common sense", I understand that privation and poverty age a person

much too quickly, and children from poor families grow up quicker than children of privilege. Besides, Elodie is so adorable, it's hard to find fault with her. She's smart, quick-witted and kind-hearted, with a questioning mind that comes in very useful when she is called upon to deduce the identity of the whited sepulchre.

This is not a profound novel, but it does have an underlying message. The people of Two Castle fear and hate the ogre, even though he is kind and considerate; they judge him by the acts of his father, and are unwilling to let go of their fear long enough to know him as a person. All the characters that are reviled as monsters, such as ogres and dragons, turn out to be sympathetic and reliable; it is the people who are the true monsters, hiding behind fear, ignorance and greed.

This is a short, but sweet book (pardon the cliché) that is designed to appeal to the simplistic worldview of children and young teens. The mystery captures one's attention, and the suspects are all plausible. If you're over ten, it's a given that you'll figure out who the 'villain' is, but that doesn't detract from the pleasure of watching Elodie work her way to the truth. While there is no romance in the book, obviously, Elodie does have her first crush on a suitably good looking older man, and blushes and stutters adorably when he is around. No ickiness about it though, I promise.

I come back to my opening description, to say that all in all, A Tale of Two Castles is a charming adventure/detective story that is a pleasure to read. This is only my second Levine book, but you can be sure I'm going to be buying her other books soon!

DISCLOSURE: This book was provided to me by the publisher via Net Galley. This review is not influenced by any considerations, monetary or otherwise.

Valerie says

A girl working for a Dragon to solve a mystery to save a nice ogre. Add that with the unique magical writing of Levine. Well what are you waiting for!

If that is not enough than I'll write more.

There is a great heroine who has a big heart and a vibrant spirit. Elodie (or Lodie depending who you ask) is on her own now and she wants to be a mansioner which is an actor (took me a few pages to figure that one out). She was turned away though; fate has bigger plans for her. A dragon offers her an apprenticeship. But this is not all, there is unrest in the city of Two Castles. The people don't like the noble ogre that passes though their city and sure enough Elodie and her master become involved in what could be a threat to the ogre himself. But how can a new apprentice save an ogre, a noble ogre to boot? That is what you find out.

There are only two irks I had with it though because they peeved me. The first was that the dragon gender is not told, no one knows it except the dragon itself. *Come on just tell us!* I thought more than once because the **IT** pronoun bothered me. Also some of the sentences sounded weird to me. I'd have to look over the sentences sometimes. It might've been because there were words that I didn't know, which I didn't expect from a juvenile book but I don't have a big vocabulary like our dragon does. I know these peeves are probably just me but still, I was peeved.

Elodie's relationship with the dragon, the ogre, and the princess are all unique you could say. The dragon is kind of like a grouchy old man. The ogre has a very vulnerable side that was so unexpected and the princess is 'flighty' (as Elodie says).

I always like going to good old fashioned fantasy, there is just so much imagination in it. Looks like there will be a sequel, if not I'll be even more peeved.

Danya says

The name Gail Carson Levine may sound familiar – she's the author of several wildly popular children's fantasy books, including *Ella Enchanted* and *The Two Princesses of Bamarre*. I read and adored both of those books when I was in elementary school, so when I saw that she had started a new series it seemed like a no-brainer to jump on board. While I did enjoy it, I ultimately found that comparing *A Tale of Two Castles* to Carson Levine's older works didn't do the new book any favours.

A Tale of Two Castles is a children's book, most likely geared towards kids in grades 4-6, so don't expect a particularly sophisticated plot or writing style. What you can expect is a charming cast of characters, a cute mystery, and a heroine with a unique dream. Twelve year-old Elodie dreams of becoming a mansioner (the fancy term for actors) and sets off on her own to seek an apprenticeship in the city. It's not until she gets there that Elodie realizes the prices for apprenticeships have increased drastically...and she cannot afford one. The poor girl has a run of seriously bad luck her first day in *Two Castles*: she worries about money, gets scared of the big crowds, and even gets mugged by a cat (don't ask).

Much like Carson Levine's older works, *A Tale of Two Castles* has a didactic quality. In English-major speak, that basically means that the book has an educational goal; in this case, to teach kids that judging people based on appearances is liable to get you in some seriously hot water. In one of the opening scenes, Elodie's mother tells her to beware the "whited sepulchre," a metaphor for someone that looks good on the outside but is decidedly less appealing on the inside. Unfortunately Elodie has a tendency to trust the wrong people, so she encounters her fair share of whited sepulchres. While some readers may find her naivety annoying, I could appreciate it since Elodie had no reason to be otherwise. The fact that she's completely alone in a new place, supporting herself financially, and chasing her dream career made me forget that Elodie's only twelve.

The city of *Two Castles* is named after – you guessed it! – the two castles on the city's outskirts, one belonging to the human king and another to an ogre. The Ogre, Count Jaunty Um (the kind of name you only find in a children's fantasy novel), may look intimidating but he's definitely got a gentle giant thing going on. Despite that, Jaunty Um is hated and feared by the people of *Two Castles*...just because he's an ogre. Even though the human king is known for his greed and warmongering, he's still afforded more respect than the Count by the townspeople. Watch out for that whited sepulchre, people!

For all its simplicity in plot and style, there was a very interesting and surprising exploration of gender in *A Tale of Two Castles*. For dragons, there are no physical characteristics that distinguish a male dragon from a female dragon – only the dragon itself can know its gender. They get very huffy if you assume one way or the other, so Elodie and the other people of *Two Castles* are very careful to refer to dragons with gender neutral pronouns. The correct title for a dragon is "Masteress," a blend of master and mistress. I thought "Masteress" was adorable and I think it could lead to some very important discussions between parents and children about our assumptions on gender in contemporary society. That said, I do wish that Carson Levine didn't capitalize the gender neutral pronouns every time they were used. Reading "ITS" every other page got tiring pretty quickly.

The dragon Masteress Meenore was by far my favourite character. Cantankerous and exacting, Meenore is an obsessive compulsive cleaner and the best deductive reasoned in the city. Because of Meenore's unique skills, the dragon is often called to solve crimes – and since *Two Castles* is overrun by pickpockets, Meenore

is pretty busy. The dragon needs help advertising its investigative services and performing other minor tasks, so Elodie is invited to come work for Meenore. The young girl may not have an apprenticeship as a mansioneer, but it's going to take all of her acting skills to help a dragon, befriend an ogre, and catch a thief...

I would recommend A Tale of Two Castles as a read-aloud for parents and their kids, and also to advanced young readers who like mysteries and light fantasy. While the book has its charms, more mature readers may want to look elsewhere.

April says

I am pretty sure everyone who begins a book enters the book hoping to love it. With a select few books that people may start off with their fists swinging, I think the vast majority of us want to love what we read. I am not immune to this, nor do I ever want to be immune to the desire to fall for new words and worlds. Unfortunately, I ultimately did not love A Tale Of Two Castles by Gail Carson Levine, despite my hopes.

[Read the rest of my review here](#)

Sha says

Gail Carson Levine got me started on fantasy with Ella Enchanted (which has a movie adaptation that I love, but the book is even better). The Two Princesses of Bamarre makes me cry every time I read it and I can never get over the themes and writing in Fairest. What you need to know, right here and now, is that GCL is my fantasy QUEEN. But A Tale of Two Castles is perhaps the pauper in her writing kingdom.

This book is a re-read for me, and it felt a little flat during my first read (maybe three years ago?). I could have done this review on any of her books that I already proclaimed my absolute faves BUT for some reason wanted to return to AToTC to see if my opinion changed. (SPOILER: it didn't.) But please oh please, do not let anything I say here deter you from any of her other books. Because there are several reasons AToTC is not like her previous writing.

A Tale of Two Castles is aimed at younger readers than Levine's usual books. Levine's niche is definitely YA, more specifically 12 to 16. You might have spooky creatures but nothing that will haunt your worst nightmares; there may be deaths, but never anything near graphic. To *very simply* sum up her style, the MC will go on an adventure and experience a new world that challenges her previous lifestyle/worldview. Clearly, great for teens who are similarly going through life changes (minus the dragons and fairies and ogres). Buuuuut as I said, AToTC is pitched a little lower: the main character is twelve and very clearly acts and speaks like a twelve year old. She can be impetuous and rash. The writing style is similarly simplified for a pre-teen audience. There are a lot of short, to-the-point sentences and ideas are repeated (in case you didn't get it the first time).

I knew that AToTC was pitched for lower ages, which is why it took me a long time to buy it in the first place AND partly why I don't blame GCL for why I dislike this book. I mean, it's clearly not aimed at me. Sure, I can love and enjoy YA (that sort of is/sort of isn't aimed at me, considering I'm now twenty-two) but that is certainly different from pre-teen lit. YA will have complex sentence structure (should have!), morally ambiguous characters, intertwining plot. ATOTC had a little of that ... but in the sense that a toe was being

dipped in the water. As an older reader, I felt like I was reading half a book, but I can imagine that this plotline was more than enough for younger readers.

But alright. Let me review the actual book now instead of explaining why I think what I think. As the book description says, Elodie heads to the town of Two Castles to become an actress. She finds out pretty fast that her dream isn't possible because she has no money. The theme of poverty runs throughout the book, not investigated enough for my tastes but explored well for a young reader book. For example, on her first day in town, Elodie is starving with only three coppers to her name. She trails after a woman selling marzipan delicacies and imagines how wonderful they would taste. She also longs for a cap, which she realizes all the women in Two Castles wear, and almost spends her last copper buying one.

Elodie is as much a frustrating main character as she is realistic. I had to pause sometimes to remind myself She's only twelve!!! She doesn't know better! Sometimes Elodie would make the dumbest mistakes, like persistently trust (view spoiler) because they were attractive. But she is only twelve, so I knew I had to cut her slack. She also made a lot of really smart decisions, and part of the plot relied on her learning to "induce and deduce and use common sense" from her new mistress, the dragon Meenore. Part of Elodie's teachings included not jumping to conclusions, which was a smart lesson to include in a young reader book.

Meenore the dragon confused me? The book characterizes dragons as very secretive of their gender, so all people must refer to dragons as "IT." Now, I may just be thinking too hard about all of this. But why would dragons be secretive about their gender? As a result, Elodie spends a lot of the book trying to guess at Meenore's gender ... which is an uncomfortable situation (for me to read) at best. It's very unlikely that Levine was making a broader statement about gender identity, but this just did not translate well. I didn't see the overall point (particularly since GCL usually tries to make overall points with her writing) and just ended up confused. If you have thoughts, please share.

In terms of plot, the book is fairly straightforward. Elodie ends up in the employ of Meenore, and rapidly ends up trying to find out who is trying to harm the ogre, Count Jonty Um. I did find the investigation a little all over the place, so if you want to guess who did it, good luck with that. The way Elodie "gathers clues" is a bit confusing and when the culprits are revealed it's kind of thrown in all at once and wrapped up with a bow. BUT the book kept good pacing and each character tied into the plot well. The ending, though rapid, made sense. So I accept the mini rollercoaster I ended up on.

Do I suggest this book? Probably not, to be honest. If you're older than fifteen I don't think you'll enjoy the writing style or narrative voice. But if you're younger, then definitely check out this book and every other GCL book is s-t-e-l-l-a-r. Three crowns because this book did everything it was supposed to, just ended up in the hands of the wrong age group.

manda says

I don't know, maybe this is better suited as a children's book, which is why I couldn't enjoy it half as much as I hoped to. *A Tale of Two Castles* recounted the journey of Elodie, a poor farm girl with nothing but "mansioning" (acting) skills, who goes to Two Castles for an apprenticeship. However, unexpected events pushed her to become the assistant of Meenore the dragon; later into the castle of Count Jonty Um the ill-reputed ogre, to protect him from those who would have him killed.

For me, even though the premise itself sounded quite interesting, the way the story was delivered just made it sound hard to believe. I couldn't be sucked into the world **Levine** created, nor attach myself to her characters.

Elodie, who was supposed to be a nobody; a 12 year-old girl who had no education other than tending geese at her far-away home, turned out to know much more than I found it possible for her to. She could detect poison by *smelling* it in her food, and quite conveniently knew how long it took before the effects started to show - a feat that would save a good many food tasters from dying, and one that is not possible to attain without years of training.

I sniffed my bowl. The scent was faint but detectable: eastern wasp powder. Rare and expensive, but she was a princess. The poison acted in an hour or two, caused chills, fever, tremors, a tight throat, death. A single swallow would be enough to kill me. But I would feel no sharp pain, no agony. No suffering.

But how did she know this? Because her friend back at home used to teach her *mansioning* and poisons popped up in a few of the stories.

Her character also didn't ring true of a young girl. Upon arrival at Two Castles, she was robbed by a cat, leaving her with a few coins that couldn't even get her food, let alone an apprenticeship. I'm over 20, and in that situation I think *I* would be panicking if only for a little while. She was far from home (and had no way of getting back), she knew *nobody* at Two Castles, had no way of sustaining herself ... but she took it all with an unusual calm. It just did not sound believable to me.

The other characters were somewhat bland. I found the way the narrator referred to Meenore was annoying. See, only dragons knew his or her own sex, so everyone else would refer to it as "it", never "he" or "she". But instead of calling it an "it" or "It", the narrator had to give us a big, bad, capital "IT". This is minor, of course, but it irritates the flow of the text. It makes it sound like a louder voice; a big, booming voice of God interrupting the narration every now and then with a voice-over "IT" every time Meenore is mentioned.

I also didn't find the people of Two Castles credible. They were apparently afraid of the dragon as well as the ogre, which was hinted at in all the warnings they gave Elodie. But they sure didn't *behave* as if they feared them. For people who were afraid of a large, fire-breathing dragon, they didn't seem to show IT the slightest bit of respect. They didn't seem to care if they might anger IT and IT would suddenly roast them to a pork. Likewise was their treatment of the ogre, who they feared simply for being big, and because his parents were apparently cruel. Never mind how obviously kind and patient *he* was. Anyhow, despite fearing this ogre so much, they still didn't show any signs of it. When the ogre hosted a banquet at his castle, instead of trying their best not to anger him, they were downright impolite and obviously disrespected him - which was evident when Count Jonty Um tried to make a speech but everybody made a show of ignoring him.

Another thing that detracted from the overall enjoyment of the book was its predictability. Perhaps because we were given this flashing red signal from the start to watch out for a "whited sepulcher" - or a person who behaved as if they were kind, but really was not - the readers suspected everyone who acted a little *too* kind. For me, instead of throwing me off when the villain was revealed, it just made the surprise - well - *not* a surprise, because I'd already suspected them and even through the course of the novel found small signs or motives for their villainy.

Some events just seemed to be random; I can't give any examples of this one, because it's just a feeling I get while reading over some scenes. They just ... felt ... blah. Like, couldn't there be another way to progress the story?

There was this repetitive explanation of deduction/induction, also reasoning behind every single conclusion the characters come up with:

"You concocted the wrist flick when you heard about the will, and you will make sure His

Majesty is informed as soon as you may. Lodie, why will he do so?" (...)

"Because Master Thiel doesn't want Sir Misyur to inherit."

"And what else?"

I spoke slowly, reasoning it out. "Because ... neither ... will ... His ... Majesty ..." I had it! "His Majesty will seize the castle. People will believe Sir Misyur guilty because he had riches to gain." I felt breathless. "Master Thiel will receive a reward for his lie."

...and there were many more scenes that made me feel as if I was having someone take my hand and guide me through the story.

To wrap it up, it was the overall credibility of the book that made me give it as much (or as few?) stars that I did. It might be a little more enjoyable for children, if they can be sucked into the story despite the random nonsensicalness of some events.

Julie says

Update: 3.5 stars.

Two Castles is sure to please Levine's fans. Several people have asked me if it is "as good" as *Ella Enchanted*, Levine's best-known title and winner of a Newbery Honor. That's a hard question to answer. *Ella Enchanted* is such a unique and clever book that I'm not sure Levine will ever top it. It was the equivalent of a lightning strike: unexpected, dazzling, and not something that can be replicated easily. However, lucky for us, Levine is an imaginative and skilled writer who is more than capable of producing delightful tales in the same spirit as her most famous book. That spirit being, of course, a richly imagined, once-upon-a-time kind of fantasy featuring resourceful, quick-thinking heroines. Fans of all things fairy tale will be glad to know that *Two Castles* fits squarely into Levine's mold (without feeling like a re-tread) and is a welcome addition to her oeuvre.

Recommended for anyone seeking a middle grade mystery or fantasy novel, a book with a proactive heroine, or a story that features theatre and acting as a plot device.

* * * * *

I might have squealed inside when I saw this title in a stack of ARCs. First, Carson Levine, no further explanation necessary. Second, a girl teams with a DRAGON to solve MYSTERIES. I know! Why am I typing this and not reading it? Clearly, I need to re-think my life's direction.

Beth says

While nothing can ever replace my love for *Ella Enchanted*, *A Tale of Two Castles* is a really fun story. Sometimes the way the story flowed felt odd, but for the most part, I really enjoyed this one and devoured it in about a day. I think had I read it as a child it would have been a favorite for sure. I already own the second book about Elodie and hope to read it this year.

Erica (daydreamer) says

Gail Carson Levine, I must say, is one of my favorite authors (at least when I need a cute, light fairytale type read). Her books are sweet, and enchanting, and just purely fun little fairytales. *A Tale of Two Castles* was no exception. It had that special magical quality that Levine's other books all possess, simple in its light fairytale esque feeling, yet beautiful with its engaging writing and endearing characters, complete with an intriguing plot, at first perhaps simple, but at the end, quite brilliantly played out and executed.

Elodie is a 12 year old girl, traveling to the kingdom of Lepai in hopes of becoming apprenticed as a mansioner, an actress. After arriving at Two Castles, with an excess of cats roaming the streets, she is unable to acquire an apprenticeship, and is instead employed to the dragon, Mastress Meenore, the Great, the Unfathomable, master of inducing and deducing, able to find any lost object, solve any riddle. When his Lordship's, the ogre, dog goes missing, Elodie assists IT (the dragon, which is called IT as only ITself knows ITs gender) in finding the dog. And thus ensues the mystery of finding who stole the dog, who poisoned the king and set the cats on the ogre, who mauled the ox, with a rather surprising ending to keep you on your toes.

Elodie is a strong young girl, who starts out attempting to fulfill her dream of mansioning, but finds her true calling in inducing and deducing, which she acquires by interacting and being with IT, and hearing IT's own deducing of mysteries. For a 12 year old, she is quite astute and determined.

The world Levine created was delightful and enchanting. The writing will strike some people as too simple, but I love it for its simplicity and the magic found within. And it's just Levine's style of writing, with stories geared toward younger teenagers and children, and not older teenagers or adults looking for epic stories with a lot of depth and stark, passionate emotion with though provoking messages. This book isn't for everyone, but fans of Levine will surely love it, and those looking for light fairytales.
