



Thirteen Orphans

Jane Lindskold

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As evocative and moving as Charles de Lint's Newford books, with the youthful protagonists and exciting action of Mercedes Lackey's fantasies, *Thirteen Orphans* makes our world today as excitingly strange and unfamiliar as any fantasy realm . . . and grants readers a glimpse of a fantasy world founded by ancient Chinese lore and magic.

As far as college freshman Brenda Morris knows, there is only one Earth and magic exists only in fairy tales.

Brenda is wrong.

A father-daughter weekend turns into a nightmare when Brenda's father is magically attacked before her eyes. Brenda soon learns that her ancestors once lived in world of smoke and shadows, of magic and secrets.

When that world's Emperor was overthrown, the Thirteen Orphans fled to our earth and hid their magic system in the game of mah-jong. Each Orphan represents an animal from the Chinese Zodiac. Brenda's father is the Rat. And her polished, former child-star aunt, Pearl—that eminent lady is the Tiger.

Only a handful of Orphans remain to stand against their enemies. The Tiger, the Rooster, the Dog, the Rabbit . . . and Brenda Morris. Not quite the Rat, but not quite human either.

Thirteen Orphans Details

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From Reader Review Thirteen Orphans for online ebook

Bill says

I originally pick up this book because I thought there might be some anthropomorphic elements, with with a group of mages based on the Chinese Zodiac... but not so much. Some personality traits and astral projection shape-shifting to be sure. But nothing that appeals to my full fledged furryness.

Still, I find a great book here, with a decent handle on young and old characters. With a very limited experience of Chinese culture for me to judge be, the world created herein seems very respectful of the cultures of historic China. Someone with more exposure than I would have to judge that.

Both the young Brenda and the old Pearl are wonderful examples of strong women characters, and I enjoyed each time the author invited us into either of their heads.

I will have to keep an eye out for the next novel, "Nine Gates."

Jacob says

Like *_The Silver Ship and the Sea_*, this book is half a book's worth of content in a whole book's pages. I wanted to like this book, since much of it takes place in the Bay Area and I love the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, but so little happens and there's a lot of talking and hanging out. It was bad enough that even one of the characters in the book got bored of it! That should have told the author something.

There were only five action scenes (one at the beginning to fool you), and the author botched two of them in terms of overwriting the lead-ins to the scenes. In addition, the main problem presented at the beginning of the book isn't resolved, although it should have been. If it wasn't for much of the setting taking place in a favored location and my liking the Chinese mythology the book is based on, I would only give this book one star.

Vickie says

Duality: that is something that this book revolves around more than any other theme. And in that sense, it is very successful. Brenda Morris never knew about a specific aspect of her father's past until it attacked them, and she is thrust into a world where 12 descendants (plus one emperor), each identified under a specific Zodiac sign, are under attack from an unknown enemy. We follow Brenda as she learns of her inherited past and fights to regain what was stolen.

The book switches POV, though it's mainly narrated by Brenda and Pearl. I really liked Brenda as a character; I can't help but compare her to Bella from *Twilight*, from their similar names and ages to their inability to resist the allure of what is dangerous. Brenda, however, is much better grounded in reality, despite the suspension of disbelief she has to undertake to simply swallow the concept of an entire other world. Also, she has to balance duality quite a bit, more so than the other characters, such as her apparent looks to her revealed East Asian heritage, and her father's behavior from the first 100 pages to the rest of the story. Within the space of one book she matures dramatically and realistically.

Pearl Bright is an embodiment of duality, from her half-Jewish, half-Chinese ethnicity to being a child star as the dark-haired foil to Shirley Temple. Her sections also pull us away from the pedantic, torturous pace that Brenda got mired in, and introduce us to the higher magics that will no doubt make the next books in the series much more interesting.

And of course the two characters act as opposites sides of the same coin to each other: the rookie to the seasoned veteran, the young and the old, one with nothing to prove and another with an old bone to chew.

The one duality that Lindsfold cannot seem to bridge well is the gap between the average American readers' knowledge of *mahjong* and Chinese Zodiac astrology and the amount of knowledge required to fully understand the switches and nuances that move the story forward. I found myself just as frustrated as Brenda about the tedious process of learning the characters for magic, and how little actual practice she seemed to be getting. This frustration was only increased by the character of Riprap, who was relegated to "Question Asker" for the sake of the reader. This resulted in very stilted and dull conversations.

I do feel, however, that the tedious process did come to fruition in a natural and violent way, so I won't fault the book too much for it. Plus, it's a first part of an intended series of novels, so naturally it would be heavy with exposition and groundwork.

I will be buying the next installment (Nine Gates, I believe, due out in August) because I'd like to see where Lindsfold takes this series, and also because I really enjoy Brenda's innate character. As a powerless newcomer, she struggles with feeling useless, as well as her futile feelings for a dangerous character. So far, she's done pretty well for a college freshman.

On a side note, Fruits Basket fans might be amused to know that the 13th orphan, the Emperor, is known as the Cat. ^_^

Lisa Grabenstetter says

I abhorred this book.

The premise was interesting, but Linsfold managed to destroy it utterly.

The pacing was snail-slow, the dialogue choppy and unrealistic. Linsfold seems to think we need every present character to repeat every new plot revelation, which means basically the same line three or four times over. This is the first book I've ever read where I actually had to skip portions of dialogue just in order to stay motivated enough to read more.

Worse, she takes what could be a story populated by strong characters of colour and thoroughly whitewashes it. Seriously, most of the main characters in this story based around Chinese history and mythology are white. That Chinese-looking girl on the cover? Actually supposed to look white, by her description.

The few non-white characters are stereotypical to a PAINFUL degree. A black man who injured his shoulder in a basketball accident, but still coaches kids in sports in order to help keep them out of gangs and off drugs? Apparently, black men can have one of two different personalities in Linsfold's world, both learned from watching 90s television. She even goes so far as to exclaim as to how Riprap doesn't even have an "African-American accent"! Not even kidding, though I wish I was.

Also, she seems to really dislike Native American people. There are at least three random, disparaging remarks towards them within the first hundred pages. No explanation why, and there are no native characters.

Summary: don't subject yourself to this book, if you value your positive outlook regarding the fantasy genre. How this schlock got past a publisher...

Hannah says

The concept of a maj-jong based magical system is intriguing, but the execution is rather dull in this book, the first of a series I don't think I'll be finishing. The ensemble cast spend most of the book sitting around talking, speculating, and working on their spells. I like to play games, but I don't like to read pages of details of mah-jong rules, tiles, and special plays, which are sprinkled heavily through the book. The final third makes up for all the discussion with a series of exciting fights and negotiations, but I felt that the middle section could have been trimmed considerably.

Dorian says

Brenda's dad wants to introduce her to an old friend of his...but when they get to Albert's place, there's no sign of him, and it looks like there's been an intruder. Even worse, when they finally do catch up with him, even Brenda can tell that Albert is, in the words of the Beatles song, not half the man he used to be. And worse again, pretty soon the same thing happens to Brenda's dad. And now what are Brenda and the allies she's just barely met to do?

This book fits loosely into the urban fantasy genre, in that it's set in the modern world, but with magic. Unlike most urban fantasy, though, the magic is based on the Chinese zodiac and the game of mah-jongg, and there is another world involved...one might almost say, invading.

The author handles the Chinese aspect well, demonstrating the magic and its related background matter-of-factly, without exoticising it. The use of the mah-jongg set to make magical talismans is inspired.

The plot-line, involving exiles, hunters, betrayals, and politics, is interesting without getting overwhelming.

But really, I think I mostly like this book for the characters. Brenda, the cheerful, practical, college kid; Pearl, ex-movie star; flamboyant Des; lost Foster; silly, over-reaching Honey Dream; ex-soldier Riprap... They're all very real, and I enjoy spending time with them.

(And in the diversity stakes, all of the main characters are at least partly ethnically Chinese, one of them is gay, and several are either middle-aged or old. All of which is pretty damn cool too.)

Kerry says

The first of Jane Lindskold's books I read was *Brother to Dragons*, *Companion to Owls*, which, as best as I can recall, a friend loaned to me. I was attracted by the title and entranced by the strange, quirky story within. (One of my goals for this year is to reread the book; I hope I love it as much on a reread many years later.) From then on, I kept an eye out for Lindskold's books. Some I passed on, some I loved (*Changer* and *Legends Walking* particularly and I wish she'd write more in that universe) while others were so-so for me. When she started her Firekeeper saga with *Through Wolf's Eyes* I was right there. I only managed to read two books in the six book series; not because they were bad but because they were dense, detailed epic

fantasy with tiny print on the page and I couldn't get my CFS-brain to process them easily.

Lindskold wrapped up the Firekeeper books in 2007 and last November saw the publication of Thirteen Orphans, the first in her new series, Breaking the Wall. This is a contemporary-set fantasy with its inspiration in Mahjong and Chinese culture. Several generations ago, twelve magical advisors and their child emperor (the Thirteen Orphans) were exiled from a world evocatively known as the Lands Born from Smoke and Sacrifice. Now, their descendants live in modern day America, some aware of their heritage and others not. As the story begins, Brenda Morris, nineteen year old heir apparent to her father, the Rat, travels with him to meet the emperor's descendant and, unbeknown to her, learn about her heritage for the first time.

But something goes wrong, and the man they have come to visit is first missing and then strangely changed. Shortly after, the same thing happens to Brenda's father - all his memories of his life and heritage as the Rat are stolen and he no longer remembers any of that part of his life. Brenda finds herself working with Pearl Bright, the Tiger of the Thirteen Orphans, and the three others whose memories have not been stolen. Although not the Rat herself, Brenda finds herself able to access some of the Rat's abilities and the five remaining Orphans work to discover and stop their enemies and return the memories of the rest of the group.

This was a very good story with a fascinating premise. I know what Mahjong is and, years ago, I played it a few times, but it isn't something I know very much about. This didn't particularly matter as so long as I knew roughly what the tiles looked like, Lindskold filled in as much detail as required for the story. The link between the game (which is used as a mnemonic for magic more than for magic itself) and magic and culture was neatly worked out and I enjoyed it very much.

I also like the characters. I think we probably get to know Brenda and Pearl best of all the main characters and I liked them both. Brenda is young and unsure, always aware she is not actually the Rat but only his heir while the others are the full holders of their power. Possibly falling in love with an enemy isn't an addition she needs, but doesn't seem able to help, the painful irony compounded by the fact the man has lost his memory in the same manner as the lost Thirteen Orphans and she is most probably falling for an illusion anyway. But Brenda rises above it all, holds her own with her companions and manages to make the right decisions when it counts.

The reasons why the Orphans are suddenly being hunted after so many years are cleverly put - and equally cleverly turned on their head in the final climax of the book. There is a full story here, but it is clearly the beginning of a larger story and I suspect we may find that what we thought was the point of the tale will prove to be a side-step beside the actual arc of the entire series.

I am looking forward to the sequel, Nine Gates, which will be published in August this year, and Lindskold is currently working on the third book, Five Odd Honors. I have no idea how long the series is expected to be and I am tempted to email the author to ask. It is kind of nice to have a rough idea what I'm getting into.

Thirteen Orphans
Jane Lindskold
Breaking the Wall, Book 1
8/10

Qualifies for: 100+ Reading Challenge, Support Your Local Library Reading Challenge

Carrie says

Two elements of this book attracted me: the author (who wrote "Through Wolf's Eyes" and its sequels, which I love), and the relation to Chinese Mythology. I was slightly wary, as the moment I saw the title I knew it related to the Chinese zodiac, and feared clichéd-ness. Granted, there have been some brilliant stories related to the zodiac, but it's still been done a lot. Also, the plot sounded very cliché. Still, I loved what I'd read of this author's works so far, so I gave it a shot.

All in all, it was a good book. Lindskold did a good job of keeping her characters strong and consistent. However, I missed the dynamic character she had given to Firekeeper in the Wolf series. Personality-wise, they all did feel like real people.

What would have made the book more engaging is simpler dialogue. The prose is good and coherent, which is fine for narration, but for dialogue by real-world people (figuratively), the text felt awkward and clunky. Most of the characters didn't seem to fit with the complex sentence syntax they spoke with, so some parts of the story felt broken and jerked me out of the tale. This also messed with the plot, but as a whole the plot flowed quite well. I was still interested enough in the story to be very engaged with it as the climax approached. It faltered during the resolution, but came back together. I felt like more of the story could have continued within that book, so hopefully the sequel will pick up almost right where this first left off. I'm rather liking how the plot is unfolding, so I will definitely be reading the sequel.

This book is relatively uneventful, but it's the first in a seemingly complex series that needs a good amount of build-up. I feel that there will be much more action in the books to come.

Kristin says

Read from 11/27 to 12/2. Great idea for a story that's marred by the fact that most of the book consists of people sitting around in a house and talking about what they ought to be doing.

Ursa says

Two and a half stars.

I love big and diverse cast of characters, I love stories that are based on the Chinese zodiacs, and anything that has to do with kung fu and Asian mythologies. Imagine my excitement when I found *Thirteen Orphans*—a book that promises me all of the above. Unfortunately, by the time I finished this book, I strongly believed that there should be a legit rule that bans Western authors from churning out Oriental fiction, anything with a narrative that tries to pass off as points of view of indigenous, or even partially, Asian characters under any circumstances. EVER.

Alright, I didn't mean it. Not really. Perhaps. Sort of.

On a serious note, it's a fact that there has been much distortion, misinterpretation, exoticification, and fetishization in the Western perception of Asian cultures and people, resulting in mildly amusing to cringe-worthy *Oriental* literary products. If there are exceptions, this book is not one.

First, the literal translation of Chinese names into English results in over-the-top silly names such as Pearl Bright, Flying Claw, Thundering Heaven, White Opal, All Winds, etc. It gets more confusing when each character is also associated with a Zodiac animal. So we have a guy who is alternatively referred to as Waking Lizard (his name) and the Monkey (his Zodiac sign). I'm torn between amusement and face-

palming. I'd prefer the phonetic translation with some sort of foot-note for explanation. Fei Chao sounds so much prettier than Flying Claw.

More importantly, I lost count of the instances the term "exotic" is used to describe multiracial and Chinese characters in the story. The most blatant and offensive one is right at the first chapter.

Brenda was not pretty, nor would she ever be so, but she was something far better—**she was exotic and interesting**. Pearl wondered if Brenda realized **how lucky** she was, and decided she probably did not. Brenda was still young enough that "difference" meant separation from the parental generation, but not from the peer group."

That's as bad as exotification can ever get.

For some context, Pearl is a Chinese-Jewish American elderly lady and Brenda is a Chinese-German American teenager. Both of their ancestors came from a fictional country that is similar to China. Would it make any sense to you that multiracial people, even those who are marginally conscious of their heritage, would look at one another and go, *wow we're so exotic*? As if they don't get enough daily crap for being "different".

More on the characters, despite the fact that they are multiracial and living from different parts of the United States, their voices and behaviors are strangely indistinct from one another. Beside cherry-picked physical features and fleeting mention of cuisine preferences, there are no other realistically perceived factors—for instance, drawl, accent, gestures—that could have betrayed their geographical origins. Moreover, characters that are supposed to be Chinese or non-Western converse in a very stilted manner of speech. One could try to reason that English isn't their mother tongue but no, they are said to be speaking Chinese that is translated into English via magic. It'd be preferable had Lindsfold accentuated their language by formal and ornate vocabulary instead.

What else? There are also girl-on-girl hate and female rivalry over love interest. I personally don't mind stories with those elements if the authors employ them to reflect a real condition in our culture rather than to create pure drama. So I didn't mind that Brenda was being extremely territorial over Foster/Fei Chao. In her defense, Brenda knew she was irrational and she fought to stay in control. To that, I said kudos. But then the tension among the girls played out in such a problematic formula—Brenda is your stereotypical "unconventional beauty" with an amazing brain and courage to make up for her unladylike manner, her lack of body curves and self-esteem; the other girls, in contrast, are gorgeous, self-assertive but "easy" and less brainy. Oh, and Brenda's love nemesis? She is a slinky bitch who wears skimpy clothes. Lindsfold's words, not mine. Talk about painfully trite motif!

I don't get much to say about the plot in spite of the fact this book is very much plot-centric. It occurs to me that the author just hogged up a bunch of interesting concepts from Asian folklore and try to write a story around them. As intricate the plot is, the actual writing is sadly dry and unexciting. The majority of the narrative is bogged down by wordy explanation for the world-building and analysis of the character's predicament. It's absolutely hilarious and infuriating to see the characters spent an extensive amount of time bundling into a room and talking about literally EVERYTHING the readers need to know. Sometimes that approach works and pulls me into the story, but in this case, it only bores me out of my skull. When the action finally took place, it often ended so fast that I got whiplash that had whiplash.

What redeemed this book for me is 1) the subdued romance between Brenda and Fei Chao, 2) the turn of event in which frenemies are formed for the common good, 3) when the female characters can get themselves together, they are a fascinating group of femme-fatales with complex back-stories.

In a nutshell, there are way worse books that have been written. Although I grimaced at many things in this book, I am interested in how the story will unfold, and I could appreciate that the author attempted to break out of the mold of YA fiction. I'll check out the next two books if they're available in the library.

Kfinney says

Conflict in the lands born from smoke and sacrifice spills over into the world of college student Brenda Morris, who learns that she is heir to Rat - Rat being one of the twelve signs of Chinese zodiac. All houses associated with these signs have been exiled into the here and now. Their descendents live mostly in the United States. Lots of spells and magical powers, but explanations of same left me bleary-eyed and wishing characters would just get it over with.

Betsy says

This has a great premise - magic, alternate version of ancient China called the lands of smoke and sacrifice, the thirteen beings who escaped this world and whose heirs eventually found their way to various parts of the U.S. Suddenly, these thirteen who are each associated with an animal from the Chinese zodiac and who perform magic spells using elements from their own personalized Mah Jong sets, are being attacked and having their memories stolen. Of the original 13, only 4 remain - two who have great magical skills and 2 more who are just beginning to learn how to use this power and the Ratling who inexplicably has found she can use magic even though the Rat who she will succeed still lives and has lost his memory. My only complaint about this book is that the ending leaves you begging for the sequel.

Ari says

rating: solid yikes

so years ago I read one of the sequels to this book -- I vaguely remembered enjoying it and thinking I should go and read the first one, and finally I've gone and done that.

from opening the book I had a premonition of yikeses, honestly. this is a book based on the chinese zodiac, with characters who have qualities associated with their animals. (possibly I read the other book by this author because I really liked Fruits Basket as a youth??) but the author and all the people thanked in the dedication and acknowledgment sections have european names, and I have much less tolerance now than I did in high school for people writing stories without at least consulting the people you'd think the story would be about....

I should have heeded my own premonition tbh. this is an author who deliberately wrote a book where all the main characters are at least partially chinese but who is from her narration /super/ uncomfortable with race. a part of this could be explained by pointing to the POV character, who has no reason to think she's not entirely white till the plot kicks in, but..... this is more charitable than the book deserves.

a few times east asia gets called "THE ORIENT" and even sometimes "the MYSTIC ORIENT" which had me flipping back to check, and this book is genuine 2008 vintage, which is certainly several decades too late for this to be explicable much less excusable.

aside from the book's discomfort with its own subject matter it has some pacing issues -- a massive amount of backstory gets lumped in right at the beginning and the action moves very jerkily -- this is the first in a series and of course the sequel hook has to be tied in, but the way it was done meant that this didn't feel like it had a real resolution of its own. up till the last ten pages I thought there would be a resolution, and all the issues with the plot itself I had been excusing in advance of an ending that would tie it neatly together.

there were things I liked in this -- I mean, the Tiger character has a hungarian jewish mother who gets mentioned a few times so of course I loved her (even with the "my mother was good with money unlike the american gentiles BECAUSE SHE WAS JEWISH" thing ok/lol/thanks), and the basic formula for the plot, along with some of its characters, are fun -- and I'd have accepted a lot of the book's pacing issues if I could have swallowed its main issue, which is that the entire mythological basis for this book isn't one the author shouldn't have been dealing with in the first place, especially with the impression of her consultants I get from the acknowledgments. I found things to like in the book and finished it, but tbh -- I only didn't throw it at the wall because it wasn't coming for /my/ culture. stick to Fruits Basket, my dudes.

Laura Jennings says

This kind of book is the only one of its kind, and I specifically sought it out because it was about the Zodiac. Video games use Zodiac archetypes in spades; literature not so much. And my God, was this a chore to get through.

The ratio of story to author-trying-to-convince-you-that-no-really-this-world-could-totally-work is about 10% to 90%. The concept in and of itself is not interesting enough to BE the story, and it is. If you've ever had somebody describe how awesome their idea for a D&D game is, this book reads like that. Heavy on the concept, low on characters you care about suffering and sacrificing. Very few fantasy novels are capable of being concept novels, and while science-fiction might get away with that more often, it's usually in the hands of the greats. Lindsfold is just not on that level.

The concept is just okay. But it never goes anywhere. There is no story here until about 400 pages, when characters start taking action instead of sitting around having conversations about how magic works, being taught how magic works, and talking some more about how the magic totally works, you guys. I mean, J. K. Rowling never once explains how her magic really, really works, and she got a story out of it. Lindsfold collapses under her own story's exposition, and the characters never really struggle with the human aspect of any of their magical responsibilities. There's never any "Holy crap, what!? I don't think I can handle this!" No "I know you guys need me, but I don't care. See you!" Lindsfold makes her characters nod and shrug and talk it out, so that she can keep explaining how the world works. For PAGES AND PAGES. The main character walks in the door at the beginning and doesn't have to suffer a setback, a jolt, or a nasty shock to be handed "Magic is real and by the way this is how it works." 400 pages later, no one else we encounter has a vitriolic, stake-changing, heavily-emotional reaction that might drive the story.

I was really hoping for some very strong, character driven stuff, with compatible and incompatible signs and strong personalities clashing while the apocalypse draws ever closer. Instead, Lindsfold's characters are calm and rational enough to talk the stakes right out of the story. And she explains why her characters are calm and rational, because we as the reader seriously need to know why that's a totally plausible reaction.

I didn't need another reminder for why adult fantasy is so ridiculously boring. I was looking for some inspiration, and if anything I discovered how NOT to tell a Zodiac story.

Sandi says

I was all set to give Thirteen Orphans 3 stars. Even though it had a lot of flaws, it kept me interested and entertained. However, I downgraded it because of the way it ended. Rather, I downgraded it because of the way it stopped rather than ended. It was as if someone had taken a bigger book and just arbitrarily chopped it in half. I can't even call the ending a cliffhanger, it was just a non-ending. It may have been the worst non-ending ever.

As I said, up until the non-end, Thirteen Orphans was entertaining but flawed. It had way too much exposition. The characters just talked and talked and talked about what was happening rather than doing and experiencing. There were too many sequences that reminded me of the original Star Trek series. You know what I mean, Kirk and Spock encounter a culture that parallels Native Americans and spend the end of the episode definitively telling each other how the culture evolved with an exact replica of the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. In this book, 19-year-old Brenda is Spock. Her deductive reasoning is astounding and always correct. She was on student council in high school, so she is also (of course) the most qualified of the group to hammer out treaties with the enemy. Other than ridiculousness, the book is fun but forgettable.
