Madison Colgate

Dr. Mary Warner

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Book Talk: *Serpentine* by Cindy Pon

1. Information on the Author

Cindy Pon is the author of *Serpentine,* a Young Adult novel in the fantasy genre. Cindy Pon lives in Southern California, and writes stories rooted in Chinese mythology. She is a cofounder of Diversity in YA, and sits on the advisory board of We Need Diverse Books. Cindy Pon is also a student of traditional Chinese brush painting. Her books and artwork can be found at <https://www.cindypon.com/>. An image of Cindy Pon, as well as one of her most recent brush artworks is below, sourced from the website mentioned beforehand.



2) Brief Summary

*Serpentine* follows the story of Skybright, a girl who lives as a servant after being abandoned at birth. While Skybright navigates her mundane, teenage struggles, she also must come to terms with a more fantastical side of herself. At night, Skybright shifts into a half human, half serpent creature. Whilst coming to terms with this part of herself, Skybright discovers a stone that is the key to saving everything she loves from the underworld. *Serpentine* not only focuses on the usual coming of age of a teen girl, but it also details the navigation of sexuality, puberty, first times, and inherent humanity. Anyone who has ever felt ‘othered’ should read this novel, as it truly underscores the struggle and triumph of overcoming traits that at some point seemed out of control.

3) Quotes that Represent *Serpentine*

*Serpentine* not only focuses on the magical element of Skybright’s not so mundane transformation, but it delves into the pressures of womanhood on young women. For example, in the quote below, Skybright and Zhen Ni are confronted with their eminent coming of womanhood, when they are pressured to face their menstrual cycles. As young girls, it can be unbearable knowing that something seemingly so base and gruesome could occur once a month for the rest of their life. Zhen Ni and Skybright are faced with this eminent threat of womanhood and what that means for their friendship and their futures. For young adult readers, viewing other girls coming to terms with this scary fact of life may be relieving in some ways, or make them not feel so alone.

“Dear girl, the fact that you’ve not reached womanhood shines as bright on your face as the moon in full bloom. I’m a seer, after all.” Instead of following her hostess’ lead and sitting, Madame Lo stood before them and scrutinized Zhen Ni. Despite her plain dress, two stunning jade bracelets encircled the fortuneteller’s fine-boned wrist. One in a clear crisp green, and the other a deep lavender, both wrought with delicate gold details. They flashed and gleamed under the bright lantern lights, mesmerizing Skybright. Madame Lo lifted a hand to her chin, and her dark, piercing eyes slid to Skybright’s own face for a breath before she said, “But don’t fret, Mistress Yuan, your monthly letting will start soon enough.”

Pon, Cindy (2015). Serpentine . Month9Books, LLC. Kindle Edition.

As a young adult searching for acceptance and normalcy, it can be terrifying when a trait, dynamic, or appearance is different from the rest. In Skybright’s case, she turns into a serpent every night. For others, they may go home to something just as terrifying as Skybright’s secret. Teens especially, seem to withhold their secrets deeply, just as Skybright does. However, as illustrated in the quote below, the reality of someone’s secrecy must be dealt with in the dark. This quote highlights one of the themes of the novel, which is, it is okay to be different, but most importantly, it is okay to be different, and be afraid of what that means. Skybright overcomes her differences and uses those traits to her advantage once she learns to take control of them.

“The lantern jangled in her grasp, and she set it on the ground, running her hands over her face, now in a panic. Her features felt the same. She pushed herself, slid back to the dresser, and grabbed the pearl hand mirror that had been a birthday gift from Zhen Ni. Her familiar face reflected back at her, although her eyes were dark and wild, and her long hair seemed alive, floating about her shoulders. A silent sob shook her, tremored from her chest through to the tip of her grotesque tail. Then she glimpsed something that caused her heartbeat to stutter. Slowly, she opened her mouth, and a long forked tongue escaped from it, waggling, as if taunting her. The hand mirror crashed to the ground, and Skybright clawed at her neck with both hands, unable to speak, to scream. Her serpent coil jerked, swept the lantern on its side, and the flame was doused, casting her into darkness.”

Pon, Cindy (2015). Serpentine . Month9Books, LLC. Kindle Edition.

Another aspect of YA literature that *Serpentine* illuminates, is struggling identity and sexuality. Skybright has a complicated relationship with her best friend Zhen Ni, especially as they grow older and begin to develop. While they are both interested in a local Monk, Skybright finds herself hanging onto moments with Zhen Ni in a more romantic way. Scenes such as the one below, are essential to young adult readers. Being confused or questioning one’s sexuality is something that should be normalized. For those who cannot freely navigate or question their sexuality, moments in novels like this may help them process their own feelings. Seeing another person experience what they are feeling may help them feel less alone.

“Skybright couldn’t fall asleep that night. It was near the end of the sixth moon, and the summer air was heavy and hot. She kicked the thin sheet aside and wound her thick hair away from her damp neck, trying to find a cool spot on the narrow bed. Her mind kept returning to the kiss she had exchanged with Zhen Ni. The kiss itself had been chaste, like she had shared with Zhen Ni before on the cheek. But there was an undercurrent there, an expectation, a bated breath. It seemed to have stoked something deep inside of her, as if touching her mouth to someone else’s had kindled a hidden desire, dormant until now. She let out a long sigh, feeling the back of her arms stick to the bamboo mat. The face of the young monk who had glimpsed her clinging to a branch bloomed beneath her eyelids, how his expression never changed as he assessed her, as if they stood in front of each other at arm’s length. Who was he? And why wasn’t his hair cut like all the others? Her dreams, when she finally fell asleep, were scattered and warm. Then insistent.”

Pon, Cindy (2015). Serpentine . Month9Books, LLC. Kindle Edition.

In all, *Serpentine,* again and again, allows the reader to feel a sense of security through Skybright’s own experiences. While Skybright may be ostracized from the rest, she does now allow the reader to feel that way.

5) Style and Craft

Cindy Pon’s, *Serpentine,* is an incredibly immersive novel, filled with complex ideas and world building. The language is filled with texture and substance, not leaving the reader ever wishing for more. While the writing style is simple, Pon’s sentence structure and use of literary devices may make this a difficult read for anyone below the high school reading level. As a college student, I can admit to the difficulty of reading her style. All the while, her craft is meant to be appreciated. Pon, at a literary event hosted by Barnes and Nobles, described the complexity of her work starting with her inspiration. Pon is inspired by Greek and Roman mythology, and she often uses myths from other cultures to inspire her own culture’s myths. Pon describes the complex relationship between inspiration, craft, and hopeful outcome. Pon wishes for her readers to feel compassion and empathy for people who are different, and at times, scary.

6) Complexity Analysis

*Serpentine* is a complex book, both in terms of structure and themes. The novel focuses on themes and conflicts that are for more advanced readers. For example, some themes include sex, puberty, ostracization, self-hatred, sexuality, abandonment, and death. I would not recommend this book to anyone under the age of fifteen, as some scenes are quite graphic and for more mature eyes. Additionally, the language and structure of the book are also quite advanced. This is by no means an easy read. It is meant to be absorbed and savored. In this way, the entirety of *Serpentine* should be considered to be at the reading level of a high school to college student.