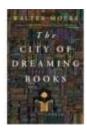
Review of City of Dreaming Books

The City of Dreaming Books by Walter Moers

Reviewed by Hollis Helmeci, Director, Bradford Memorial Library

The City of Dreaming Books is serious literature masquerading as illustrated fantasy. Moers sets the story of Optimus Yarnspinner in Zamonia, where the astonishing is normal. That Lindworms (which resemble friendly, well-educated dragons) are most commonly authors, and that a city could be dedicated entirely to books, and that there is an empire of books underground—this is normal for Zamonia.



Optimus is heir to a *perfect* manuscript, and travels to the city of Bookholm seeking the marvelous manuscript's author. What is the point of Optimus Yarnspinner's journey and adventures? Optimus wishes to meet the author of this *perfect* manuscript which he inherited from his "authorial godfather," Dancelot Wordwright. It is this search which leads Optimus to Bookholm and thereby to his doom.

Like many of us, Optimus seeks perfection and receives an education instead. Optimus is a Lindworm with the innocence of Candide and the resourcefulness of Robinson Crusoe. He is—to his possible misfortune—misused by a Shark Grub named Pfistomel Smyke. As Optimus tells his story, he includes illustrations, which prove helpful and entertaining.

Naïve Optimus is sent to the realm of the Shadow King, with the "animotomes" and the "toxicotomes" and the "Fearsome Booklings," because he seeks the author of the most perfect writing in the world. The very nature of his quest leads him into the danger of discovering the nature of books, and the nature of authors, and the nature of publishers and booksellers. The world of books is not a safe place. And one cannot predict what will befall one in the catacombs, anymore than one can know what will happen in one's life among the many books of our world. With his humor and good nature, Optimus overcomes many frightening challenges and reaches his goal. But, he also loses what he sought as he discovers several truths about Bookholm.

Moers's delightful sense of humor combines with the intense seriousness of the story which makes Optimus' story a cautionary tale. Moers includes the Zamonian version of the Golem in *The City of Dreaming Books*, which he uses as a fine literary device, and as a warning about protecting books from their enemies. There are other allusions throughout the book, including ones to *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Fahrenheit 451*.

Perhaps The City of Dreaming Books is a tale warning us to beware of what we wish for, as we

may truly receive it. Certainly Optimus finds what he seeks--and is richer for it in knowledge, richer for knowing the Shadow King, and richer for knowing the reality of bookselling. But Optimus is also poorer by far for knowing what he could only imagine before. Yet, when Optimus finally leaves the city, he is wiser than when he entered and far happier as he turns away from others' books in order to write his own story.