

Johnathan Strange & Mr Norrell  
by Susanna Clarke:  
A Review\*

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## Summary

A lot can be said in describing this book, and I'm sure most of it has been. "JK Rowling for adults" is one that I've heard. I could respond to that, but I think Stephen King said it best, "JK Rowling is JK Rowling for adults. Duh!" "If Jane Austen wrote Harry Potter" is closer to the mark, but still fails to grasp the essence of the book. In short, it is unlike anything else I've ever read, and I think comparing it to other authors or books is unfair to all sides. While it shares a time period with Miss Austen, and a story about Magic with Ms. Rowling, these are superficial facets.

That said, the world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is very close to the world of Miss Austen, with only a very slight twist from historical fact to historical fantasy. A reader who is familiar with Miss Austen's work will feel quite at home here, but *a priori* knowledge of manners and mores in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England is not required.

In fact, it would be fair to say the too much familiarity with Miss Austen's writing style might be a bit of a hinderance. I found myself expecting commas where there weren't any, for example. Though let me say that this is an extremely minor quibble with what is an outstanding book; that it is a first novel simply makes it even more impressive.

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\*The most current version of this document is available at [2blog](#)

## Review

To say that I liked this book doesn't come close to expressing my feelings about reading it. I was enveloped by the book in a way that made me feel as if I was reading a historical novel and not a work of fantasy. The book is long and engrossing and filled with a wide variety of interesting characters. Even the uninteresting characters are, in themselves, interesting if only because they balance the rest.

What is the book about? The restoration of magic to England during the early years of the 19th century. More than that really should not be said because it comes too close to spoiling a interesting and intricate plot.

The day of the visit was preceded by stormy weather; rain had made long ragged pools in the bare, brown fields; wet roofs were like cold stone mirrors; and Mr Honeyfoot's post-chaise travelled through a world that seemed to contain a much higher proportion of chill grey sky and a much smaller one of solid comfortable earth than was usually the case.

That paragraph comes on page 7, and is when I knew I was going to very much enjoy this book. The vividness of the picture Mrs Clarke draws is something rare and wonderful when a reader finds it, like a silver coin in amongst the pocket detritus in a long-neglected coat.

The book abounds with quotes of that quality. Open a page at random and you will find some gem:

When he awoke it was dawn. Or something like dawn. The light was watery, dim and incomparably sad. Vast grey, gloomy hills rose up all around them and in between the hills was a wide expanse of black bog. Stephen had never seen a landscape so calculated to reduce the onlooker to utter despair in an instant.

"This is one of your kingdoms, I supposed, sir?" he said.

"My kingdoms?" exclaimed the gentleman in surprize. "Oh no! This is Scotland!" (pp. 469-470)

The main characters of Mr. Strange and Mr Norrell are vivid portraits of two men obsessed with something in quite different ways. One is by nature secretive, while the other wants to share his knowledge as widely as possible.

Yet, at their most basic level, they are the same man. Or perhaps reflections of each other.

It is a book without a clear villain. Oh, there is a villain, of sorts, but you know him too well and understand his motivations too much for him to be really villainous. And there are minor characters who are certainly within the classic stereotype of “villain”, but they are not central characters. The central characters are too well-drawn to be simply “hero” or “villain”, they are more complex. Mrs Clarke takes the time to really show these characters and their motivations; and even if one does not always agree with the actions of the character, there can be no question that he is doing what he believes must be done.

Perhaps the most interesting characters are not Mr. Strange and Mr. Norrell, but rather Stephen Black and Childermass. These two are much more accessible to the reader; Black more so than Childermass.

And while it is fair to call them “minor” characters, they are not so minor as much of the essential elements of the plot revolve around their actions.

*Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is a wonderfully written book with an engaging plot and a alternate reality that will pull you in and hold you through a too-short 800 pages. I can't recommend it enough as it is one of the best new books I've ever read.