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The Blackthorn Key

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Review

Several apothecaries have been murdered and apprentice Christopher Rowe fears for the life of his kindly master, Benedict Blackthorn. After a randomly abusive episode with Master Blackthorn, Christopher returns home to find Blackthorn murdered and their shop ravaged. In the midst of the mess, Christopher finds an encrypted note left by Blackthorn. Christopher takes the message and tries to solve its contents with the help of his best friend, Tom. However, the authorities pass the blame of Blackthorn’s death onto Christopher. Now on the run, Christopher unearths Blackthorn’s involvement in a secret alchemist society where they pursue the Prima Materia, or First Matter, that God used in creating the universe. Christopher realizes that all the murdered apothecaries were alchemists and they were killed for their knowledge on the Prima Materia called Archangel Fire. From the clues in Blackthorn’s background and the evidence collected from Christopher’s sleuthing, he believes the man behind the murders is a high ranking official in the Apothecaries’ Guild Council, someone Christopher thought he could trust.

Sands’ debut novel is an original story loaded with mysteries, codes, deception, explosions, murder, and outrageous courage. As readers start the book, they learn that Christopher is fearless when it comes to trying anything. This fearlessness is why Christopher is a both a good apothecary and a gifted trouble maker. But that fearlessness becomes his saving grace as he, alone, faces down the people who murdered his beloved master. However, there is one major drawback to this supernatural historical fiction. The story’s setting is in the 1660s, but the way the characters talk and think seems too modern for the time period being presented. Sands does have an author’s note stating he used modern spelling for locations and our modern calendar for the times, but he makes no mention of modernizing all the characters’ language. Also, parents and teachers should note this book is suited more for teens than middle-grade readers due to the graphic descriptions of several fights and murders. Still, on the whole, a face-paced and thrilling ride of a read.