



Amulet by Kazu Kibuishi

[Intermediate]



"Be careful who you trust. Not everyone you believe is an ally has your best interests at heart."

An all-ages epic fantasy much adored by lovers of Japanese animation from Studio Ghibli; in each of the 9 volumes there's what I call a Hayao Miyazaki flourish: a jaw-dropping landscape, like the library in a lake surrounded by pale, mist-shrouded mountains, built on the Atlas-like back of a gigantic stone sculpture representing the very first Elf King.

The story begins very much in the real world, two years after a family tragedy. Emily and her younger brother Navin are taken by their now-single Mum to live in their great grandfather Silas's house in the autumnal countryside. Great Uncle Silas went missing a long time ago, leaving his ancient home abandoned, so it's going to take a whole lot of love. Emily joins in the cleaning frenzy, but you know how it is when you're a kid: you can't help touch... Cue cat-eyed, ectoplasmic monster! Later that night things go bump with a fright, and Mum is abducted down a subterranean tunnel that threatens to fall apart. They *run*. They hardly stop running throughout volume one in a bid to avoid sudden death and recover their Mum with the help of some most unexpected allies.



A war's been brewing, you see, between humans and the Dark Elves. And I know what you might be thinking: the clue lies in the "dark", but we humans have been pretty good at starting wars ourselves and everything's a question of perspective. It's a question of perspective and history and precedent. Don't expect everything to be clear cut or everyone to be well informed –even about their own past.

As to the titular Amulet or Stone, Emily acquires one of several very early on. She soon discovers that it gives her powerful telekinetic abilities which she gradually learns to master. Emily also discovers that the Stone likes to speak to her; and, very swiftly, you'll start to fervently wish that it wouldn't.

Oh, there are so many mysteries! There are high-speed chases, ferocious battles, aquatic Tomraider-like caverns and monumental, death-trap halls. There are monsters galore and even flying mech-suits for Navin to master. There are floating island outposts reminiscent of Roger Dean's, a central floating city which is a spectacular mix of Florentine Renaissance and Roman Baroque, and sunlit golden arbours which put me in mind of Maxfield Parrish.



There are a lot of painful separations when parties divide to follow individual quests, but there's also the relief and unbridled joy of catching up with each other once reunited. Emily and Navin's family dynamic is explored in complex ways (some of which I won't even hint at) but it's a brilliant reversal that – when they do finally find Mum – she's far more alarmed at their alien surroundings than her children. All she wants to do is take them safely home, but for Emily and Navin that's not an option: they've become emotionally involved, and the children's familiarity – their *equanimity* – disturbs her.

As to the Amulet, it has its own ambitions....





Remember the warning I began with? "Be careful who you trust." So much of this is about trust. Trust in your friends and family, for example, to pull through for you. In addition, "Not everyone you believe is an ally has your best interests at heart" leads readers to watch both newcomers and old allies alike anxiously! But what's very refreshing about this series is that redemption is far from impossible, and initial enemies may prove themselves capable of gratitude, reconsideration and honour. Kibuishi makes it very clear that you cannot judge individuals by their race or nation or leaders.

Lastly, I cannot help but return to the Amulet. That is, after all, what it wants.

"Do you think all Stonekeepers are cursed? Maybe that's why we were chosen.
"Not because we were the most powerful... but because we were the most vulnerable."

