The Girl with the Red Balloon

Katherine Locke
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The Girl with the Red Balloon is a thought-provoking look at modern German history through a lens of magic and time travel.

Ellie's class trip to Germany is supposed to be a fun spring-break adventure. When visiting the Berlin Wall she sees a red balloon, unattended, and decides to get a photograph with it. Her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, often talks of the girl with a red balloon who saved his life.

As soon as Ellie touches the balloon, she finds herself in 1988 in East Berlin. She is rescued by Kai, a young Romani man who works for a secret organization that smuggles people over the Wall through the use of magic red balloons.

Ellie, Kai, and Kai's partner, Mitzi, soon discover that someone is using forbidden magic to attempt time travel, and people are dying as a result. This must be stopped, even if it means that Ellie can never return home.

The complex story is handled seamlessly, from Ellie's grandfather's time in a ghetto to Ellie's experiences in West Berlin. Characters are well developed and compelling, each facing obstacles based solely on prejudices that they are able to overcome through thoughtfulness and positive action.

Locke's is an enthralling story. It exposes the cruelties inflicted on minority populations under authoritarian regimes, but counterbalances such pain with magic, friendship, and even a little romance.

CATHERINE THURESON (September/October 2017)