



## The Blackthorn Key

*Kevin Sands*

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“Tell no one what I’ve given you.”

Until he got that cryptic warning, Christopher Rowe was happy, learning how to solve complex codes and puzzles and creating powerful medicines, potions, and weapons as an apprentice to Master Benedict Blackthorn—with maybe an explosion or two along the way.

But when a mysterious cult begins to prey on London’s apothecaries, the trail of murders grows closer and closer to Blackthorn’s shop. With time running out, Christopher must use every skill he’s learned to discover the key to a terrible secret with the power to tear the world apart.

## The Blackthorn Key Details

Date : Published September 1st 2015 by Aladdin

ISBN : 9781481446518

Author : Kevin Sands

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Mystery, Historical, Historical Fiction, Fantasy, Childrens, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Adventure, Fiction

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## From Reader Review The Blackthorn Key for online ebook

### Nat says

This book was SO SATISFYING! It has humor, history, mystery, science, religion, snarky characters, potty jokes, *and* it reads like a middle grades version of a Dan Brown novel. I gobbled this down like Christopher Rowe gobbled down his "icey cream" on Oak Apple Day -- read the book, and that will make sense. Also, Bridget the loyal pigeon is the BEST. Definitely one I'll emphatically promote to seventh grade readers.

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### R.J. says

A cracking good middle-grade adventure read, with loving attention to historical detail (including the religious and political aspects that often get left out), plenty of mysteries, codes and puzzles, vivid characters, high tragedy and low humour -- in short, a book many readers will love and want to recommend to others, and justly so. It shows a lot of talent, depth and confidence for a debut novel and Kevin Sands seems clearly on his way to a solid career.

If I had one niggle, it would be that there isn't much here for girl readers who hope to see characters like themselves, since the only females are some cute little girls, a sympathetic mother, and a pigeon, all of whom play a significant role in helping our boy hero but then quickly disappear. Still, there's a few hints and loose ends that could lead to a sequel, and perhaps we'll see more of characters like Sally, Cecily and Molly in further adventures.

Four and a half stars, as I can see myself reading this one again to catch all the clues and nuances, and perhaps even reading it aloud to my youngest in a year or two.

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### Erin Bow says

This is lined up to be Simon and Schuster's big Middle Grade title for the fall. GOOD CHOICE, S&S.

Set among the apothecaries -- and secret alchemists -- of London in 1665, this book is a perfect MG page-turner, with codes to crack and secret doors to open and vast conspiracies to foil, oh my. There is high adventure, some moving moments, and a truly satisfying number of explosions.

When I do bookstore events, I usually hang out in the kids and teens sections, trying to match readers with books. (Tip to other authors: this is better than sitting behind a table upfront while people try to avoid eye contact.) Blackthorn Key will be my new go-to for all those who loved Percy Jackson or Artemis Fowl. It's that kind of book, and just that good.

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### Cait • A Page with a View says

This was easily one of the best middle grade books I've ever read. It was just plain fun and the main

character's hilarious personality came through so strongly. It kind of reminded me of The Bartimaeus Trilogy at times?

Christopher is an apprentice to an apothecary who taught him Latin and all sorts of symbols. There's a cult slowly picking off the masters in the guild, so Christopher's master leaves him a series of clues and codes to track down the killers.

It was a light adventure that turned out to be pretty funny (yet never got annoying or felt like it was *trying* to be clever). A lot of middle grade books feel like they're talking down to the reader, so I appreciated how there were a lot of fun details here that weren't overly simplified. It just made the world and characters feel a lot more believable & realistic. Basically, the whole story was well written, engaging, and a really fast read that was complex enough to interest any age range.

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### **Ross Blocher says**

*The Blackthorn Key* is the smart and gripping fictional tale of Christopher Rowe, a young orphan-turned-apothecary-apprentice in 1665 London who gets caught up in a plot involving a cult that seeks an alchemical weapon and is willing to kill for it. Throughout, author Kevin Sands incorporates knowledge of 17th century England and chemistry as it was understood then, discarding a lot of nonsense and highlighting the things apothecaries of the time would have had right. The book is filled with puzzles, and the protagonist's intelligence is fun to track with: Christopher is brilliant, but in a clear-headed and realistic fashion. There's no time wasted following false clues or mistaken notions. The book provides a lot of action as well: there are explosions, fights, and a whole lot of physical damage visited upon the characters. A really fun, quick read - I look forward to working my way through the rest of the series.

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### **Amy says**

When his Apothecary Master dies, 14-year-old apprentice Christopher sets off to solve the mystery of the kindly man's death, amidst codes, puzzles, secret formulas, sinister cults, and more. Humor, adventure, mystery, and danger, along with a trouble-causing, extremely likeable main character, will make this a hit with young readers! I loved it!

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### **Brian Yahn says**

Essentially, *The Blackthorn Key* is a plot driven mystery. The problem is: without any twists--beside the one on the back of the book--it's too predictable. Sure, it's got plenty of cliffhangers and surprises, but nothing that really takes the book in a new direction.

Although it starts off strong with a quirky protagonist and his goofy sidekick having a fun little misadventure, the rest of the story is too consumed with plot to let the characters shine.

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## joey (thoughts and afterthoughts) says

[See the full review at [thoughts and afterthoughts](#).]

**Rating: 4.5/5**

### Should this book be picked up? the tl;dr review:

- Frenetically paced mystery with solvable puzzles providing an interactive reading experience
- Hist-fic world building is rustic, has medieval flair, and the tone is vividly portrayed given it's time; mild “fade to black/off-screen” gore
- Characters and relationships (i.e. bromance) feel organic. However, there isn't a strong female presence
- There is a pigeon named Bridget. You will have animal/pet feels
- Story is self-contained (though part of a series) and is courageously resilient, full of hilarious tomfoolery, and painfully tragic

### Initial Thoughts:

It seems like stories with animal sidekicks will, without fail, garner 4+ stars from me. NO COMPLAINTS HEREEEEEE.

*Full disclosure: I received an advanced reader copy of *The Blackthorn Key* from the Book Blog Ontario Meet-Up. I extend thanks to Simon and Schuster for providing me with the opportunity to review this book.*

(view spoiler)

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### **Temi Panayotova says**

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### **Iliana Simeonova says**

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### **diegomarcapaginas says**

Un libro lleno de amistad, misterios y secretos que me maravilló. Lo mejor la ambientación londinense del siglo XVII y todo el entramado mágico/alquímico que hay en torno a la trama. Me gustó mucho el protagonista y creo que leeré más sobre sus próximas aventuras.

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### **Kari Ramadorai says**

Kevin Sands' Blackthorn Key is well written. Period. I would share it in a heartbeat, and it's a quick and easy read.

Christopher was an orphan in the busy London of the mid 1600's. Taken as an apothecary's apprentice at

eleven, he's bonded to his master. What's more, he's good at learning the trade. There's a murderer about, and he stalks apothecaries. The rest you'll have to read.

It's been a long time since a book's impressed me this much. Christopher and Tom are likeable, and the sensations of London come across palpably. Kevin Sands' solid writing, the good editing, the accurate historical setting, the puzzles without making reading difficult, all of it adds together to make a great book for the 4-7th grade readers.

The only reservation that I have about it is the inclusion of a particular cult that along with some of the history wouldn't make sense (it's a very specific year in England's history) to a young reader. A second concern is the deaths that start the mystery are pretty grim, though off-screen.

~review based on an ARC

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### **Brandy Painter says**

Originally posted here at Random Musings of a Bibliophile.

I feel there is a lack of good quality MG historical fiction that is fun and adventurous, where the point isn't to teach a history lesson, but to just have a story that sweeps you up in its magic and action. The Blackthorn Key by Kevin Sands fills this need.

Christopher Rowe is an apothecary's apprentice in post Restoration London. He works hard, but he has a kind master who teaches him well and allows him enough free time for adventures that often end in mischief and trouble. He can't complain about his life. All of that starts to fall apart when a series of murders occur in their small corner of London. Murders that seem to be targeting apothecaries. When Christopher's master becomes the next victim, Christopher's entire future is left unsure. Worse he finds himself a suspect. As time is running out, Christopher races to find the true murderer and finds himself caught in a web of politic intrigue and ancient intrigues.

Christopher is a hero whose story it is easy to get swept up in. When the reader meets him, he is trying to convince his best friend Thomas it would be a good use of their time to build a cannon. I really enjoyed the bond between Christopher and Thomas and how they behaved very much like typical kids their age. They have the responsibilities of their time and social situation that influences their life, but they are happy, active, inquisitive kids looking for ways to lighten the intensity of their days. Modern kids will be able to find much to identify with there.

The mystery aspect of the story is well done. I felt like the discoveries Christopher made were realistic enough to not stretch incredulity, but made for an adventurous read at the same time. What he was able to do and accomplish fit his character well too. He is a bright boy and is fueled by a desire to regain control of his future. It is the world's best motivator.

This is a book that is heavy with male characters. There are girls in the story who are helpful and if there is going to be a sequel, I would love to see some of them have a bigger role and importance. However, given the world in which Christopher was moving and working, the roles the girls played made sense.

As I read, I was just so excited to be reading a fun historical mystery where that was the whole point. So

refreshing.

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## **Jay Kennedy says**

~Video Review~

<https://youtu.be/8Od9fv5S3NA>

Brilliant. Utterly brilliant. I won an advanced reader's copy book from a GR giveaway and I am so happy I did. This book is set to release on September 3rd 2015; which is when you should buy and read it. To be blunt, it's amazing, and quite honestly one of my new favorite middle-grades.

London 1665. A world of wigged gentlemen, drunkard peasants, and orphaned children. Christopher Rowe is an orphan at Cripplegate Orphanage, when he impresses an elite member of the apothecaries guild and is then taken in as an apprentice to Master Apothecary Benedict Blackthorn. Christopher learns all kinds of remedies, potions, and lethal poisons in his master's care; skills that will save his life more than a few times. Whispers of murder are spreading through the streets and London's apothecaries' seem to be The Cult of The Archangel's target. Christopher is set on a perilous journey involving conspiracies, codes, secret alchemists, puzzles, and pigeons. Who doesn't like pigeons?

Kevin Sands writing is superb. This book is written in 1st person, which to me can sometimes sound amateur if not done right, but Sands does it right. The mix of real history and events is blended well and keeps it interesting, however, I'm very surprised there was no mention of the plague that hit London in 1665. That sort of feels like a missed opportunity, but nevertheless the history that was given was welcome.

Edit: The plague is mentioned by the end of the book.

I completely recommend this book to anyone who loves to read about apothecaries, alchemists, potions & poisons, and anyone else who likes middle -grade. I look forward to see what Kevin Sands publishes in the future.

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## **Krissysch says**

Oliver Rohrbeck (auch bekannt von den Drei ???) ist einfach ein super Sprecher, der perfekt zu dieser Geschichte gepasst hat. Die Story ist toll, schön abenteuerlich, und das Geheimnis, das aufgedeckt werden muss, wirklich spannend. Als Hörbuch fand ich die Geschichte wirklich super, nicht nur für jüngere Leser/ Hörer, sondern auch für die Älteren. ;)

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## **Darth J says**

**The Da Vinci Code meets The Apothecary, minus Tom Hanks's unflattering hairstyle**

Yep, there's even a secret bookcase door. Often "keys" in this book are the chemical kind that would make Professor Snape (RIP) proud.

I thought that for a MG book, this was actually pretty well thought out. While it can be a bit dry in parts, the characters themselves are pretty clever and inventive. It goes to show that books aimed at kids don't have to be full of forced snark à la Nickelodeon or Disney Channel--seriously what happened to the programming there?!--to be interesting.

#### Tigger Warnings:

(view spoiler)

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### **Julia says**

»Verrate es niemandem«

*Bis zu dieser rätselhaften Warnung war Christopher Rowe eigentlich zufrieden mit seinem Leben als Lehrling des Apothekermeisters und Alchemisten Benedict Blackthorn. Er hatte ein Dach über dem Kopf, sein Meister lehrte ihn nicht nur, wie man Mittel gegen Warzen herstellt, sondern auch wie man verschlüsselte Botschaften knackt und Rätsel löst. Doch das alles ändert sich, als eine Serie mysteriöser Morde London heimsucht. Fast immer sind es Alchemisten, die getötet werden. Christopher spürt, dass sein Meister in Gefahr ist. Ihm bleibt nur wenig Zeit, die Mörder zu enttarnen und hinter ein Geheimnis zu kommen, das so mächtig ist, dass es die Welt zerstören kann ...*

Das Cover hat es mir angetan, diese coole Mischung aus Mysterie, Abenteuer und Rätseln. Zu gefühlten 80% war es daran Schuld, dass ich den Blackthorn Code lesen wollte und ich hatte echt Erwartungen an das Buch. Die große Stärke des Buches ist die ganze Alchemie-/Apothekerthematik und dass es kaum andere (Jugend)Bücher aus dem Bereich gibt.

Die Charaktere sind liebevoll ausgearbeitet. Einerseits ist da Christopher, der ein bisschen eine Harry Potter-Rolle einnimmt, wenn ihr wisst, was ich meine. Er ist klug, hat Rätsel seines Meisters gelöst, die ich die paar Seiten, die ich Zeit gehabt hätte, sie zu knacken, nicht geschafft habe. Er ist loyal seinem besten Freund Tom gegenüber. Die Loyalität ist übrigens beidseitig, anfangs war ich mir zwar nicht so sicher, was das zwischen den beiden sein soll, doch mit der Geschichte entwickelt sich auch ihre Freundschaft insoweit, das man sieht, dass die zwei alles Mögliche für einander tun würden. Und Christopher's Gefühle seinem Meister gegenüber, auf die ich jetzt nicht weiter eingehen werde, sind glaubhaft beschrieben. Die zweite der Figuren ist der bereits erwähnte beste Freund Tom. Ich bin so froh, dass ich das Buch gelesen habe und nicht nach den ersten Kapiteln auf meinen Kopf gehört habe, der keine Lust auf so eine blöde Figur hatte! Am Anfang ist Tom nur der doofe Freund, der einfach allen Blödsinn mitmacht, den Christopher vorschlägt. Doch in ihm steckt noch viel mehr. Tom ist ein wunderbarer Freund und Bruder und ich mag ihn so sehr für alles, was er aus eigenem Antrieb für seinen besten Freund tut.

Ich hatte das Gefühl, ich gehöre nicht zum angesprochenen Publikum. Es liest sich wie ein Buch für jüngere Jungs. Gründe: 1. Es kommen im ganzen Buch höchstens vielleicht 10 Mädchen oder Frauen vor. 2. Ständig kriegt irgendwer etwas in die Weichteile. (Kann mir übrigens mal jemand erklären, wieso das so lustig sein soll?) Das sind zwei Punkte, die ich herauskristallisiert habe. Die Geschichte hat einfach eine Atmosphäre um sich, die eher auf Jungs ausgerichtet ist, besser kann ich es nicht mehr beschreiben. Dennoch kann man das Buch auch so echt gut lesen. Es waren dadurch halt Kleinigkeiten dabei, die ich nicht so super fand, aber hey, ich hatte trotzdem Spaß an dem Buch!

In diesem Buch gibt es keine Liebesgeschichte. Für mich etwas ungewöhnlich, in den meisten Büchern, die ich lese, gibt es wenigs tens am Rand eine, aber alles andere hätte auch nicht gepasst. Stattdessen wird der Fokus auf das Lösen des Rätsels, des Blackthorn-Codes, und die Such nach dem Mörder gelegt.

### **Über den Autor:**

Kevin Sands hat Theoretische Physik studiert und bereits als Wissenschaftler, Unternehmensberater und Lehrer gearbeitet. Er lebt in Toronto. »Der Blackthorn-Code - Das Vermächtnis des Alchemisten« ist sein Debüt.

### **Fazit**

Der Blackthorn-Code ist ein fantastisches Buch! Ich fühlte mich zwar nicht immer angesprochen und hatte einige Kleinigkeiten, die mich gestört haben, doch die tollen Figuren, die Thematik und der Handlungsverlauf gleichen das mehr als nur aus.

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### **Candi says**

This is a fantastic, fast-paced historical mystery and I honestly did not want to put it down! Aimed at middle-graders but definitely one that any reader could enjoy, **The Blackthorn Key** is the complete package – mysterious puzzles and codes, thrilling and suspenseful action, history and science, and exceptional friendships.

Set in 1665 in the city of London, this book introduces us to Christopher Rowe, our clever hero, who is apprenticed as an apothecary to Master Benedict Blackthorn. Having rescued Christopher from an unknown future in the orphanage, Master Benedict acts as a compassionate father and mentor to this boy who is eager to learn everything he can about potions, puzzles, and books. The baker's son, Tom, makes a wonderful friend and sidekick, being constantly dragged into Christopher's little schemes and experiments. These two make a great pair and I really enjoyed every minute of their adventures with one another. When a menacing cult begins to systematically murder the city's apothecaries, Christopher is determined to get to the bottom of this mystery before he finds himself the next victim. He must use all of the knowledge he's gleaned from his master, along with plenty of courage and ingenuity, to solve the biggest mystery of all and escape imminent danger. There are bad guys galore and Christopher must learn who he can truly trust. I must say there is a lot of page-turning action in this book!

**The Blackthorn Key** gives us a snapshot of a piece of history that is quite informative but not at all mundane or too mystifying for the middle grade reader. The potions and puzzles should interest anyone that enjoys science or magic. However, one bit of warning from this reader: there is a fair amount of violence and danger in this book that could be disconcerting to a younger middle school child. Some gruesome descriptions of the murders and other brutal assaults may be okay for the mature middle grader, but I hesitate to recommend this to the complete gamut of grades 3-7 readers as noted on the back of the book. But, as always, parents use caution – you know what your children can handle. This is definitely a book worth reading and has huge potential for this debut author! I would love to see a sequel to this book; I think Kevin Sands left just enough open at the conclusion for this to be a possibility – at least I hope so! 4.5 stars

I received an advanced reader's copy of this book from Goodreads and Aladdin Books in a first reads giveaway in exchange for my honest opinion.

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**Andrei Cioat? says**

Ce dor mi-a fost să citesc ceva ficțiune, în genul istoric, care să nu mai plictisească! :) Super carte, cu de toate, amuzantă, doi prieteni într-o călătorie super, ce să mai. Chiar merită 5 stele!?

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**Ramona says**

It's really rare to find a middle grade novel that's both a great page-turning adventure and also a detailed, thoroughly researched, believable piece of historical fiction. While there's a little bit of magic and some elements that border on 17th century sci fi here, the world of London in 1665 is rich and real, as are the lives of its merchants and apprentices. At the same time, the nearly non-stop action, adventure and mystery will keep readers turning the pages, and the solution to the mystery is a good, surprising twist (which is often where middle grade mystery/adventure novels fall short for me). Highly recommended!

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