YA Series Profile

SERIES: The Lunar Chronicles series by Marissa Meyer

The Lunar Chronicles is a series of young adult cyberpunk novels, which reimagines classic Western fairy tales set in a distant future, where countries have become consolidated by continent and humans, cyborgs, androids, and a race of evolved moon colonists coexist on various levels of unease and distrust. Each book tells the reimagined story of a different fairy tale heroine (Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and Snow White) as they join the group from the previous book, exploring the events that transpired and their role in them, and trying to find the missing Prince Selene and outwit the evil Queen Levana of Luna, the cruel ruler of the moon colony and the ultimate stand-in for the wicked queen and evil stepmother of every fairy tale.

The series is made up of: four main books; a companion book that acts as a prequel and the villain's origin story; a short story collection with each story detailing background events mentioned in the main series; and a two-volume graphic novel following one of the side characters from the first book. Only the four books of the main series will be discussed here.

Book One of the series is *Cinder*, a retelling of Cinderella, which follows Linh Cinder, a cyborg mechanic living in New Beijing. When the mysterious and devastating plague claims the life of her beloved stepsister, Linh is sent by her spiteful stepmother to be a cyborg volunteer for the cure trials. But when her time in the royal medical lab places her in the path of the handsome Prince Kai, gives her information about her buried memories and cyborg transformation, and alerts Queen Levana to her presence, Cinder's life can never be the same again.

Book Two follows *Scarlet* (Little Red Riding Hood) as she tracks down the people who kidnapped her grandmother from their country farm in the European Federation, accompanied by a young street fighter named Wolf. Meanwhile, Cinder has escaped prison and is in search of more answers about herself--when Cinder and Scarlet's paths cross, they realize their goals may not be so different.

Book Three is about *Cress* (Rapunzel), who has been stuck in a satellite by herself since childhood with only tech for company and has become an elite hacker--but Queen Levana is using those skills for her own gain, and now she's asked Cress to track down Cinder. Cress works to sabotage Levana and help the Lunar crew as the plague grows stronger and Levana is closer than ever to total dominion over Earth.

The series culminates with Book Four, *Winter*, in which Levana's stepdaughter, Winter (Snow White) is fighting against being watched all the time for the slightest misstep--but she has her own ways to undermine her stepmother's rule and use Cinder's cause for a true revolution.

An interesting effect of reimagining fairy tales for a modern and young audience is that fairy tales are one of the first ways young children learn and are taught these assets. Many people have dismissed fairy tales as being archaic in many of their concepts, but don't address how the climax of these stories are often progressive (for the time of their origin) in the brief moment of agency for the heroines. This series takes the little agency given by the original stories and expands it, and in doing so, makes the obstacles of the fairy tales more relatable to young readers and more easily identified as developmental assets.

Fairy tales usually focus on their hero's goodness (i.e. positive values) to overcome a lack of other developmental assets (uncaring family, all work no play, isolation/no social life, no/low self esteem); the Lunar Chronicles works the same way, leading many of the "family"-based assets to develop later as "found family"-based instead. And rather than having each new book grapple with the same set of assets as the previous one(s), the series comes up with new combinations so that they feel comparable but not redundant, and allow for multiple character growth arcs. In addition to encompassing all the Positive Values assets (#26-31), the Lunar Chronicles focuses on the following development assets, with many developing over the course of the full series:
- Empowerment: Community Values Youth; Youth as Resources; Service to Others
- Boundaries & Expectations: Family Boundaries; Positive Peer Influence; High Expectations
- Constructive Use of Time: Creative Activities
- Positive Values: all
- Social Competencies: Planning and Decision Making; Interpersonal Competence; Resistance Skills; Peaceful Conflict Resolution
- Positive Identity: Personal Power; Sense of Purpose

Regarding the readers themselves, I think the ideal age range is 12 & up. The fairy tale aspect is a good entry point for younger and/or reluctant readers, and it is a good vehicle for helping younger readers digest heavier aspects such as political intrigue and upheaval, emotional abuse, classism and discrimination, and more. And while there is romance between characters, it doesn't take center stage and is not as emotionally fraught as readers may expect from YA novels, therefore allowing more entry points from readers who don't care for romance-heavy plots.

I think a public library would be a more likely scenario for where this series would be most popular. While fairy tale retellings have made a serious comeback since *Cinder* was first published (and so then during the rest of the Lunar Chronicles' publications), it is first difficult to imagine a scenario in which a classroom would be able to integrate it into a lesson plan, and then secondly it is *not* difficult to imagine the way young readers would look down on being told to read fairy tales for class--as if they were being treated as children, rather than the almost-adults they see themselves as. A public library setting would allow for less judgement, real or not, as well as the surety that comes with freedom of choice and choosing for oneself.

Similarly, I think this would be perhaps most effectively used as a source of pleasure reading. The quasi-urban fantasy setting allows readers to engage creatively with imagined settings unfamiliar to their personal world, while also allowing them to engage in something familiar and nostalgic (a fairy tale). Like the probable preference of circulation through a public library by its readers, pleasure reading feels like less justification is required (by those readers) to explain why they picked it up without being made to feel childish.

Should it be utilized in the classroom, I think it would work best in a late middle school or early high school Language Arts/English Lit class, attached to a lesson plan about adaptations, mythology, or introducing students to different types of fiction genres.

I don't believe its popularity would be dependent on demographic location, either. The futuristic cyberpunk setting allows for entrance points from all real world settings (rural, suburban, urban) without giving any single one an edge. The fact that none of the books start or take place in what American readers would know as the USA (and which in the book is referred to as the American Republic, and is assumed to include Canada), and that none of the heroines originate from there, helps place all American readers on a similar playing field when entering the different settings of this series.

As mentioned throughout this profile, there are many entry points to the Lunar Chronicles series. In terms of specific interests, this may be the first instance that young readers encounter cyberpunk in novels. I think readers can be pulled from fans of cyberpunk movies and films, such as *Blade Runner* and *Akira*, or of cyberpunk comics, graphic novels and manga such as *Heavy Liquid, Ghost in the Shell* and *Battle Angel*. The companion two-volume graphic novel could also be used as an entry point. For readers who look for character-driven books, the shifting POV within each book would offer familiarity, while having a different protagonist per book would offer an exciting change of pace.

However, the uniqueness of the series's world makes it difficult to pinpoint other series that are particularly similar to it. The twisting of fairy tales brings to mind the tongue-in-cheek retellings in The Princess Tales series by Gail Carson Levine. While their readership may skew a little younger, they offer a way for nostalgic readers to enter the Lunar Chronicles, as well as Levine's more mature standalone princess novels. The ethical questioning puts Marie Lu's fantasy series in mind, particularly the Young Elites series. Other urban fantasy and cyberpunk series readalikes include Laini Taylor's Daughter of Smoke and Bone series, Emily Suvada's This Mortal Coil series, Heather Anastasiu's Glitch series, and the classic Mortal Instruments series by Cassandra Clare.