

This novel is the first in a series by Mary Hoffman called The Stravaganza Sequence. *City of Masks* is followed by *City of Stars*, *City of Flowers* and *City of Secrets*.

London High School boy Lucien, is sick and dying of cancer. After receiving a present from his dad, he discovers that he is a Stravagante, empowered with the ability to transport himself from this world to that of the sixteenth century. As the teaser on the front cover states 'Enter a World of Treachery and Danger', Lucien is not sent back to the sixteenth century for entertainment but to save the city of Bellezza from a potentially evil ruler. Each time he stravagates to Bellezza, challenges and obstacles await him.

Befriended by Arianna, the two of them develop a bond before they both discover that Arianna is to become the next ruler of Bellezza. Lucien must ensure he leaves and returns to his world before his parents are aware each day. However as life ends for Lucien in his current world, a life without illness opens for him in Bellezza.

Cleverly told, the reader discovers the mysteries, secrets and ways of life in Bellezza as Lucien does. Bellezza of the sixteenth century is very similar to the city of Venice, the novel is exquisite in its descriptions of Italy, masks, the Duchessa, gondolas and festivals. This novel is a good recommendation for boys currently disengaged with reading.

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City of Masks by Mary Hoffman is the first in a series of four fantasy novels in the Stravaganza Sequence. From the first page, the book "teems with operatic intrigue, murder, masks, morality and love" Carousel book reviews.

I found it a compelling read, a really powerful time-shift into a parallel world based on 16th century Venice.

Lucien/Luciano is in remission from a brain tumor in 21st century England, a much-loved only child whose parents are greatly worried for his well-being after the chemotherapy which, amongst other side-effects, has made him lose his dark curly hair and physical energy. When he wakes with a full head of hair, Luciano's adventures in Bellezia are only about to commence. Here he is healthy and commences a deep friendship with an attractively compelling Talian girl called Arianna.

All Hoffman's characters now and in the imaginary past are strongly believable and engrossing. I would highly recommend this as a class novel in either Years 7 or 8 depending on the reading maturity of the students and the possibility of an English and HSIE unit on the time.

Also the whole *Stravaganza* series and other of her works (eg. *The Falconer's Knot*) deserve a place on the school library shelves.

Rarely does one read such competent and original time-shift fantasy writing as Hoffman is capable of; this re-release in 2008 with a more modern cover than the 2002 edition to make it more accessible to the current younger adolescent readers deserves to be a real hit.

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