*Kushiel’s Dart*

Jacqueline Carey

Tor Fantasy

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A Sensuous Fantasy: *Kushiel’s Dart* by Jacqueline Carey

Reviews of genre fiction novels released more than two decades ago are rare. However, with George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* HBO adaptation, Netflix’s production of Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher*, and Amazon’s adaptations of Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* and Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* series, readers may be interested in discovering older fantasy series that were either overlooked or considered niche at the time of their release.

A book cover of a person

Description automatically generatedPerhaps more importantly, though, is that Jacqueline Carey’s *Kushiel’s Dart* (the first book in one of three trilogies) successfully does what a significant portion of modern media fails to achieve—portraying ethnic and sexual representation in a manner that not only makes sense for the setting but doesn’t bludgeon the audience with a sociopolitical message or utilize stereotypical depictions. And make no mistake: both the book and series are adult-oriented political fantasy stories featuring a healthy dose of sexual content, LGBTQIA+ representation, and feminist perspectives set against an alternate Earth historical setting that some might consider borderline heretical.

The novel’s protagonist, Phèdre nó Delaunay, is a woman who begins the story sold into indenture by her parents in an alternate history version of France. As she grows up—first in The Court of Night Blooming Flowers (comprised of several brothels where courtesans double as members of a religious order) and then under the patronage of disgraced poet and spymaster Anafiel Delaunay—she learns that one of her people’s deities has marked her as an agent of change. While schooled in the arts of seduction, she also studies the arts of spycraft and receives an education far exceeding what most people in her country attain. The purpose behind all this training is to uncover any seditious or traitorous plots against the ruling queen of Terre D’Ange, who her patron, Anafiel, has sworn to protect.

Through lush imagery and poetic prose, Carey leads the reader through a complex narrative filled with court drama, intrigue, international politics, greed, lust (both for sex and for power), multicultural conflict, various types of violence, and questions about the nature of the soul and humanity’s relationship with the divine. All of the content is well-considered and included for character development and plot progression rather than for shock value and edginess.

Audiences who enjoy the eroticism of historical romance novels will certainly have their appetites whetted. The inclusion of edgier content focused on bondage, dominance, and sadomasochism portrays healthier expressions of non-heteronormative sexualities than books like E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* could ever hope to achieve. Likewise, readers searching for the drama, scheming, and swordplay for which Alexander Dumas is famed in *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* will find their champion in Phèdre’s companion, Joscelin Verreuil—a warrior-priest sworn to protect her with his life despite his chaste religious perspectives. Then, too, feminists who take issue with how female protagonists are often portrayed in fantasy literature will likely be pleased with Phèdre herself. While there are elements of wish-fulfillment in the protagonist’s design, the character is shown to be a complex, empowered woman who merits the respect of her society.

Complex plotlines, themes, and character conflicts are only the beginning of the novel’s appeal. The evidence of Carey’s research into historical societies is evident throughout the story, creating lush backdrops of grounded ethnic diversity lost during our own medieval and Renaissance eras. The Romani make an appearance as a not-entirely welcome ethnic group within D’Angeline society, and Carey takes pains to rectify the culture’s negative portrayal and stereotypes. Pre-Christian Celtic cultures are given new life, as are Teutonic and Nordic cultures. Even an alternative form of Judaism is included in the novel, allowing readers to witness elements of how Jews existed within mainstream European society through a new lens that honors and illustrates facets of their culture.

What shines through the novel from the first page to the last is the story’s central themes of acceptance and tolerance of different groups, which is encapsulated by the oft-repeated phrase “Love as thou wilt.” Considering how mainstream media often seems to write stories based on a checklist that fails to resonate with audiences, perhaps this novel should be used as an example of how such stories could and should be written.

As a novel read for pure entertainment, *Kushiel’s Dart* and the series’ other books are among the more engaging stories I have read in the past two decades; for such a long and intricately plotted book, I consumed it in a matter of days. From a writer’s perspective, the book is a masterclass of plot construction, pacing, characterization, and appropriate diction choices aligning with the perspective from which the story is told. Despite being twenty years old, the book is a stellar example of how to fuse multiple genres of storytelling into a compelling narrative that treats controversial content with both appropriateness for the story’s context as well as sensitivity. New writers—either those entering the world of books or those gearing up for a career in screenwriting—would be well-served by reading this book.