



In the Night Garden

Catherynne M. Valente , Michael Wm. Kaluta (Illustrator)

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A Book of Wonders for Grown-Up Readers

Every once in a great while a book comes along that reminds us of the magic spell that stories can cast over us to dazzle, entertain, and enlighten. Welcome to the Arabian Nights for our time a lush and fantastical epic guaranteed to spirit you away from the very first page.

Secreted away in a garden, a lonely girl spins stories to warm a curious prince: peculiar feats and unspeakable fates that loop through each other and back again to meet in the tapestry of her voice. Inked on her eyelids, each twisting, tattooed tale is a piece in the puzzle of the girl's own hidden history.

And what tales she tells! Tales of shape-shifting witches and wild horsewomen, heron kings and beast princesses, snake gods, dog monks, and living stars each story more strange and fantastic than the one that came before. From ill-tempered mermaid to fastidious Beast, nothing is ever quite what it seems in these ever-shifting tales even, and especially, their teller.

Adorned with illustrations by the legendary Michael Kaluta, Valente's enchanting lyrical fantasy offers a breathtaking reinvention of the untold myths and dark fairy tales that shape our dreams. And just when you think you've come to the end, you realize the adventure has only begun.

In the Night Garden Details

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Author : Catherynne M. Valente , Michael Wm. Kaluta (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review In the Night Garden for online ebook

mark monday says

Tales within tales, tales out of space, tales that spring from stars that fall from sky to take human shape; the writer writes like the dreamer dreams dreams - some dreams yearning and romantic, others dark and tragic, each dream holding a little bit of the next dream in its heart: the story as Oriental Ouroboros: the Arabian Nights as template, as both starting point and point of resolution; themes and metaphors and symbols slowly surfacing, to disappear and then reappear again, transformed, reborn - a byzantine pattern of eastern arabesques and western curlicues, swirling together and then apart; the writer weaves a tapestry of stories woven within stories; tales that leap from earth in the form of beasts and birds, tales out of time, many tales within one great, enchanted tale.

Siria says

This is much the kind of book I would expect to be written by someone who changed her name to 'Catherynne', with that spelling—it's all fantastical creatures and quests and magic. It *is* a much more intelligent book than I expected, with stories nested within stories, and gender tropes are inverted (there are no damsels in distress here) to my great satisfaction. The maiden is the monster is the pirate; women can grow up to be fierce warriors.

However, the Arabian Nights-style format can be a little confusing, and the time line (which spans centuries) can be difficult to keep straight—this is not a book to put down and leave for a while. I also found the prose terribly overworked—it was ornate in ways that sometimes didn't make any sense, all metaphors and similes and occasionally ye olde dialogue. If the prose were a little less awkward and the narrative just that bit more straightforward, this would be a really great book—as it is, I enjoyed *In the Night Garden*, but won't be rushing to seek out the conclusion of the duology.

Stephen says

5.5 to 6.0 stars. HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION and may make it on to me list of "All Time Favorites." This is an absolutely amazing novel that I believe could become a "classic" in years to come. A modern fairy tale told as a series of interwoven "stories within stories within stories" that all come together in one fashion or another (itself a brilliant achievement). This is a "one of a kind experience" and I can not wait to read the sequel.

Nominee: World Fantasy Award for Best Novel (2007)

Winner: James Tiptree Award for Best Novel (2007)

Winner: Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature (2008)

Megan Baxter says

I have loved or really enjoyed all of Valente's books that I've read. I'm a big fan. And while I quite enjoyed *In the Night Garden* quite a lot, there were moments when it feels like she was almost losing those strands of story, that they weren't being woven together quite enough and started to feel a bit snarled instead of simply messy.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Kay says

Tales within tales within tales, all woven together like a magical, colorful tapestry depicting griffins, dead moon walkers, beastly princesses, princely beasts, pirate saints, Stars, snake gods, and so much more, all written in dark ink around the eyes of a little girl. Reading Valente's prose is like dreaming; during the act, you understand everything and think you see the truth, but when jerked back into reality, the stories fade together into a colorful, abstract image. It's pretty and meaningful, but you can't quite explain the story behind the image as well as you would like to.

The book begins with a lonely little girl who lives in the palace gardens. A prince, curious and slightly afraid, meets the little girl, and soon after the two bond in a tender friendship punctuated by midnight meetings in which the girl spins her tales. The tales she spins are myths of creation, journeys, religion, death, and life, but not as we have heard before. Some of the myths are dark, involving death and violation, but others are whimsical and yearning. A number of fantastical creatures inhabit the pages, all interacting in some way or another, as if existing on a great web. They are spread apart along the plane of the web, but somehow, they are all directly or indirectly connected in this big tapestry of life.

In the Night Garden is one of the most unique books that I've read in a long time; it's a book that you read for the stories and the prose, a book in which to meander, not a plot-dominated book that keeps you up at night with non-stop action. Valente's writing is flowery and imaginative, but purposeful. She chooses her words carefully and does not write for the sake of putting words down on paper. It takes a while to get used to the flow and rhythm of her prose, but once you do, you lose yourself in her words and stories, just like the little prince who loses himself in the girl's tales.

Sometimes, the tales within tales within tales got confusing, and I lost track of where I was. I was tempted to even make a little map of what happens. But I think that while the book is composed of stories, the stories come together to result in the symphony. Would you attend a symphony orchestra to listen to just the violins or the cellos? Would you try to isolate each section, analyze the single instrument's contribution to the overall whole? Some may, but in doing so, we sacrifice the final symphony for just one instrument. No, we listen for the finished product, to rejoice in how so many different components come together to create beautiful music. That is how this book should be read, as a symphony of well crafted tales that create a more beautiful whole. Approach the book with patience and an open mind. It will all come together in the end as something lovely and unique, I promise.

Algernon says

I've read parts of The Arabian Night about thirty years ago. In the Night Garden succeeds in recapturing that sense of wonder, of exploring incredibly rich, exotic cities, meeting fantastic creatures, magicians, kings and vagabonds, sailing to mythical shores or descending into mysterious caverns. And Catherynne Valente managed this without copying or borrowing from the original tales.

Her world may be inspired from different folk tales (I recognized Baba Yaga hut and people turned into birds, and I'm sure there are others) , but it feels original and modern in its self awareness, sometimes ironic treatment and dialogue. Some of the tales are quite dark, others bring a smile or a laugh to the fore - like the tale of the princess in the tower which is both at the same time. Some tales may feel random, but in the end it all makes sense, when the threads of the plot are gathered together, and the reader finds out that every little detail has a part to play in the final outcome. And some stories are carrying over from one major tale to the other - making the overall worldbuilding a coherent project.

The real strength of the novel for me is in the beautiful language. Valente is a stylist, a perfectionist who believes a tale can and should be beautiful.

We were just holes, after all, holes filled up with light, and deep in our secret hearts we worried that we were an accident, nothing more than puddles who stood up and gave each other names...

I could compare her style with Patricia McKillip or Peter S Beagle - two of my favorite authors - but she stands in a class of her own. Maybe because she relies in her storytelling on the oral traditions and on the ancient mythologies, maybe because her imagination runs wilder and farther than the other authors I've mentioned.

Anyway, I would recommend this book to everybody I know, without reservations. I would even say it is good for younger readers, who need to flex their imagination muscles, despite the relatively mature content. (The Arabian Nights are in fact a lot more explicit and raunchy than this one) . I would also recommend it to older readers like me, who like to remember that they were children once, and they loved to open the first page of a book and read a line like this:

In the fifteenth year of the second Caliphate, a child was born in the Blessed City of Ajanabh to a family of traveling spicers whose fingers smelled forever of cinnamon and coriander.

Kagama-the Literaturevixen says

I guess what I really have a problem with is how the tales are told in this book. I was expecting a 1001 nights approach to it all. One night,one tale. You know the thing.

But in this the stories just pile on top of each other, The girl starts out with a story and then someone in that story tells a story to another character and then we go into that story and so on.

It was maddening to me and I lost interest in trying to follow the increasingly more confusing story.

Carol. says

Book as arabesque.

Short story leads to short story, each providing background and impetus for the next, characters answering questions to what led them to that intersection. It's a beautiful technique that comes back around to many of the original story characters.

The trouble for me is that the short story makes it easy to put down and go do something else, as it's often a natural break in the plot and action, so it took me far too long to finish. More clues or story in the background setting of the young wild girl in the king's garden could have helped give context to why she is there and keep me motivated; perhaps the second book will bring the story telling back around to the "real" narrative of the young girl and the prince.

I find the language and ideas poetic and beautiful. Some might find the prose "purplish" but I would say that fans of de Lint and Beagle will love it. Valente deserves the James Tiptree Jr. award with such interesting female characters and her ability to turn conventions sideways. The story of the princess in the tower became particularly fascinating. It's a very full, imaginative book that usually does not go too far into moralizing; characters are created uniquely and quickly in the short stories, and subsequent ones even bring insight into villains and evil kings and sorceresses.

Susan says

This has taken forever for me to finish. I just didn't want to go back to it. The first part is beautifully written, but her prose feels very effortful, as if all the beauty had to be hammered out, line by line, and she wants you to see each stroke. It finally picked up, but the interconnecting stories create a jumbled mess of a plot, not at all helped by the fact that many characters live for centuries, therefore making a general timeline almost impossible to put together. Very prettily described things happen in a very haphazard order.

Grace says

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture," or so the old quote says. I can't help but remember this saying as I attempt to write down some of my fragmented, all too feeble thoughts regarding Catherynne Valente's masterwork, *The Orphan Tales: In the Night Garden and In the Cities of Coin and Spice*. To start out with a bang, I have to tell you what my reaction was upon completing the last page of the second book. It was 1am, and I set the book down, after having to re-read one of the pivotal revelations on the last page and

say "ohhh...I SEE." I turned the light out, lay down in bed, and started crying. And I don't just mean a few pinpricks from my eyes like I've had happen for a handful of tales over the years. I mean nose-sniffing, shoulder-shaking crying. I cried and I shook my head as I cried, laughing at myself for reacting more strongly than I had to any book I'd ever read. I cried because the books were done. I cried because the ending was so incredible. I cried because I was in awe of Catherynne Valente, only one year older than me, and having given something to the world of myth and story and imagination that I feel should go into the same column (and high in that column) as the greatest contributors of all time. How can one person have so much inside? And be able to get it all out onto the page?

This book is not an easy read. Let me tell you that straight-out as well. Many people have written reviews saying "I couldn't keep track of the stories" or "the format was too distracting, with the nested stories." I also found this to be true the first time I read the first book. I got to a little over page 100, and returned it to the library. But Valente's name kept cropping up...first on Endicott Studios, featuring an incredible short story I loved, then on Jen Parrish's website, as she created a gorgeous necklace in the shape of a boat with red sails for an auction. I sought out more of Cat's short stories, and I was blown away by every single one. Finally I decided to try the book again, settling down with it at the start of winter, when the fire crackled in my fireplace, and the stories folded around me like blankets against the snow. I approached it with more patience, and gave it time, rather than trying to rush through it. And I discovered that this book was not only good...it was the most imaginative, fully-formed, genius, and moving work of literature I'll most likely ever read.

If I seem to be overly prosaic and prone to hyperbole about this book, (I should say books, since it's a duology, but the two volumes fit together like one work) it's just a symptom of how much it has crept into every fiber of me. I now want to write extra stories about descendants of her tales. I want to create art showing the pivotal moments in the stories that I adored.

The message of the books is both simple and incredibly complex. The tales themselves are both an intricate symphony, and a simple thread that weaves around to end at a simple resolution. Valente is the Weaver of these tales, closing her eyes, grabbing all that is around her, and remaking it into beautiful gowns, girls, and cities, knowing all the while where the tales will end, whether that end is happy or sad.

A side note: I read a review on here saying that the reader didn't understand why Valente received the Tiptree Award, since her book only featured female protagonists, and didn't seem to make any new contributions to feminism. I cannot imagine that this reader read the same book that I did. The feminism carried through in every tale in a tale in a tale. Valente took every mythic archetype, every trope, and turned it on its head, making you think to yourself "well why DO I always assume a Selkie is a woman, or that a Satyr is a man? Why DID I presume that the sailor who stole Sigrid from her home had to be a man? And why can't daughters grow up to be warriors, and sons grow up to be beautiful?"

Kat Hooper says

ORIGINALLY POSTED AT Fantasy Literature.

I haven't read any fantasy quite like Catherynne M. Valente's *The Orphan's Tales* duology. This is the story of a young orphan girl who is shunned because of the dark smudges that appeared on her eyelids when she

was a baby. She lives alone in a sultan's garden because people think she's a demon and nobody will claim her. However, one of the young sons of the sultan, a curious fellow, finds her in the garden and asks her about her dark eyes. She explains that there are wonderful stories written on her eyelids and that a spirit has told her she must read and tell the stories; Then the spirit will return and judge her. The prince loves stories, he begs her to tell him one, and so she begins.

The rest of *In the Night Garden* and its sequel *In the Cities of Coin and Spice* is a collection of nested stories that are interspersed with short interactions between the young prince and the girl with the dark eyes (somewhat like *The Arabian Nights*). These stories are all connected to each other, but each is unique and highly imaginative. There are fascinating creatures--many based on myths and fairy tales--like a monopod, two griffins, a necromancer, a wicked papess, an otter king, a woman with three breasts, three brothers with dog heads who become accidental cannibals, a leucrotta, a Magyr, a skin seller, living stars fallen to earth . . . and these are just some of those that I can describe in a few words (and I'm not giving them justice). The characters in *The Orphan's Tales* remind me of the Cantina Scene in *Star Wars*. The darker characters, (e.g., the wizard and the necromancer), are particularly excellent. Ms Valente's imagination for bizarre characters and plots exceeds Lewis Carroll's and she never lets up. Each story is brilliant and brilliantly told.

And the prose is truly beautiful:

"He was very tall, and thin as a length of paper. His skin and cloaks were the color of the moon--not the romantic lover's moon, but the true lunar geography I had heard whispered by Sun-and-Moon Nurians come to buy glass for their strange sky-spying tools: gray and pockmarked, full of secret craters, frigid peaks, and blasted expanses. His eyes had no color in them save for a pinpoint pupil like a spindle's wound--the rest was pure, milky white. He passed three solid gold pieces over my mother's palm, and she shuddered in revulsion at his touch when the money changed hands. She handed me over eagerly, examining the coins like a fat pig snuffling at its supper slop."

"My mother had kept silent as a nun since the day my sister was taken from her. I was an infant when she vanished from us; I never knew that sister. But her absence stalked the house like a hungry dog. The hole where she had been took up space at our dinner table, it sagged and slumped in the musty air, it ate and drank and breathed down all of our necks. . . I grew up alone in that silent house with nothing but the stinking cows and my mute mother and the hole. Even my father didn't want to spend his days there; he stayed in the fields directing hay-rolling and goat-breeding until it was dark enough to slip back inside the house without anyone bothering him. But still, the hole answered the bell when he rang, and he had to scurry to bed with his head down to avoid looking it in the eye."

There are many more of these gorgeous passages to enjoy. My only complaint about the writing itself is that there are dozens of characters in *The Orphan's Tales* and they ALL talk like that. So, it's not very realistic, but I suppose realism wasn't exactly what Ms Valente, as a poet, was going for.

One other small complaint I have is that because the stories of *The Orphan's Tales* seem at first to be random and unrelated, it's hard to feel deeply involved with many of the characters because they don't stick around for long (except for the orphan and the sultan's son who don't do much but talk and listen). But, again, that's the point, because we learn at the end of *In the Cities of Coin and Spice* that all of the strange stories and characters actually contribute to, and explain, the history of the orphan girl. Perhaps that's a bit of a spoiler, but you'll enjoy the stories more if you realize that it's all going somewhere. And, besides, you're a clever reader, and you'll probably figure out that there's got to be something going on here besides just a bunch of beautifully-written, highly imaginative, unconnected stories.

But, the main reason I'm telling you this is because I know you'll get more out of your reading if you follow the advice I'm going to give you... Just trust me: Get yourself a pencil, a pad of paper, and a fine cup of caffeinated coffee (in my experience, a Starbucks Venti Latte works best). Sit down with *In the Night Garden* and read the first few pages up to the point where the girl starts to tell "the first tale I was able to read, from the crease of my left eyelid." This first story is about Prince Leander. Write "Prince Leander" at the bottom of your paper. Prince Leander runs into a gray-haired tattooed "crone" and a few pages later, she starts to tell her story. Write "crone," or whatever you want to call her, above Prince Leander's name. Soon, "crone" starts telling the story that her grandmother told her. Write "crone's grandmother" above her name. (I've got a picture of my own notes at *Fantasy Literature*) This is not the kind of book you can leave for a few days and come back to unless you have notes to tell you who was talking to who. Or unless you're a lot smarter than me ... which is certainly possible.

Highly recommended for the reader who appreciates beautiful prose, is willing to take notes, and is looking for something original.

Read more Catherynne Valente book reviews at *Fantasy Literature*

Nicole says

The tales told to the young Prince come from the tattoos inked on the skin of a young woman. These same strange tattoos that are keeping her isolated from the rest of the sultan's household, make her seem fascinating to the prince. Each night he sneaks out to meet with her in the Sultan's gardens.

This book is two series of interwoven, short, personal tales told from the tattoos. Tales that ultimately braid together. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* there is a series of people's pilgrimages told in first person. The stories are intermittent and interspersed but linear despite their interrupted telling. Although the stories are being related in first person by various people they are really told that way by one girl to one boy. He is escaping to bright visions of the larger world adults live in. She is seeking acceptance in any world. I began reading this book and immediately was repelled by the awkward and repeated use of overwrought similes. Every thing is like something else, this is arresting and distracts from the flow. The first few tales continued in this fashion but then the descriptive style became more varied and less self consciously dramatic. My least favorite description that irks me still was "desultory eyes". How do a pair of eyes lack consistency do they move disjointedly? The only way I could conceive of this fitting is if they wandered in differing directions with disconnected focus but this did not seem to be the point being made in the context. I kept thinking I would put this book down but I found myself drawn back to the complexity of the telling even if I did skim passages as soon as they threatened an excess of difficult descriptions.

This book missed being very good by an excessive verbosity and awkward English but despite this the story's contents are worth the time to read. Her creatures were not just relating good stories but also help us look at normal behavior and why it is desirable or not. How any individual's goals could influence disparate lives.

I will read the sequel to see where this author goes with her ingenious, metaphorical monsters and her various humans.

Tatiana says

This book was a truly magical experience. I came across it almost by accident looking for something to satisfy Mysopoethic award winner category for my reading challenge. I am very happy I did because "The Orphan's Tales" is definitely not something I would normally be interested in.

This book is an Arabian Nights-inspired collection of stories that are nested within each other and cross over in the most unexpected places. The stories are not simple re-workings of old worn-out fairy tales. Now and then you come across a familiar character from Middle-Eastern, Slavic, Asian, or Ancient Greek folklore but they are put in a completely original setting. The writing style in the beginning seems a little purplish with a lot of description but gradually you come to appreciate its vividness as an integral part of the stories and you simply can't put down this book of monster princesses, witches, horse-women, Stars, skin traders, dog-headed monks, Selkies, satyrs, and priestesses.

I wouldn't assume that this book is for everybody, but if you like everything fantastical, if you are a fan of dark fantasy, this book is a must-read for you.

Reading challenge: #1 - O.

Brian says

Fans of creation myths, fractured fairy tales and stories in the key of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* will find plenty to love in this wondrous book of interweaving tales.

Valente writes in a panoply of differing voices; her stories rich and unique in their telling – marvelously intertwined and displaying real writerly prowess. The reader is taken down the rabbit hole of tales, each telescoping deeper into a rich narrative replete with beautifully imagined monsters, the angels and devils of human (and not-so-human) nature and fully imagined lands that even some of the best Fantasy writing can't get right with 1,000 pages of exposition.

Highly recommended. I will definitely continue reading Valente and look forward to the follow up book to this one - *In the Cities of Coin and Spice*.

Allison says

Strange, fascinating, and mesmerizing. This has an old world fairy tale feel but is like nothing else. The stories within stories within stories... how did Valente keep track? And somehow it all fits together into a larger tapestry. The structure is a work of art, the language is enchanting, the stories sobering and realistic and fantastic at the same time. More, please.
