



The Islands of Chaldea

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Aileen was supposed to grow up magical – just like the other women in her family. Unfortunately, she’s just found out that the magic seems to have skipped a generation... but that’s not her biggest problem right now.

In her world, there are four Islands of Chaldea. The largest and most magical island has been cut off from the other three for decades – and is slowly draining the magic from them.

But now a prophecy has come to light. Someone from Aileen’s island will gather a man from each of the three islands, bring down the magical barrier, and unite them with the fourth island again. And according to the king, that someone is Aileen’s Aunt – who insists on dragging Aileen along. AND the boy Aileen is sure she’ll marry (one day); the local boy with more brawn than brain. Someone seems to want to stop them too... someone with an interest in keeping the Islands apart. But still, with magic on their side, nothing can go wrong. Right?

The Islands of Chaldea Details

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From Reader Review The Islands of Chaldea for online ebook

Dorian says

This is Diana Wynne Jones' very last book; left unfinished at her death, it was completed by her sister, to the delight of DWJ fans everywhere.

A prophecy says that if a Wise Woman journeys from Skarr, through Bernica and Gallis, and enters Logra with a man from each island, the curse can be lifted and the Crown Prince rescued. So off they go. The narrator (apprentice Wise Woman and dismally convinced she's no good at it), her aunt (the actual wise Woman), the Crown Prince's little brother (self-centred and arrogant), and the brother's servant (a clod-hopping foreigner). And this being DWJ, none of this is quite what it seems, and the story does not go in obvious way.

I really, really liked this. It has something of the feel of "Power of Three", and something of the feel of "The Time of the Ghost", and quite often a feel of Irish fairy-tales (which naturally I find pleasing!). There is a most excellent cat, and plots and intrigues, and a hot air balloon. And I am looking forward to reading it again and trying to find the clue that Ursula Jones says (in the Afterword) that she built the ending off.

Nic says

I was curious about this, for sure. The manuscript was left half-finished when DWJ died (*sniffle*), and was completed by her sister. Shameless bragging: DWJ's publisher held a competition in which fans could write about what the author meant to them to try and win a copy of the book, and I was one of the winners. I was over the moon, because it meant that I didn't have to wait for the USA printing or order it all expensively from the UK, which I was on the verge of doing before I heard I could win it.

I'm impressed. To my eye, it reads like DWJ through and through. The whimsy, the language, the sly touches, and the fact that this mostly-gentle story has some real betrayals and turnarounds in it. The end seems a bit rushed to me, but that actually happens with a number of all-DWJ books, too.

I like that Aileen and Ogo casually figure out before the climax that the animals with which they're traveling - Plug-Ugly the cat, Green Greet the parrot, and Blodred the dragon-lizard - are actually the guardians of the North, West, and South respectively. I had figured it out already, and was a little afraid that it was meant to be a big surprise at some point. I was glad and relieved when Aileen and Ogo drifted to that conclusion well before the animals show their true power.

Another twist took me by surprise when they landed on the island of Logra. They'd flown there in a hot air balloon in order to bypass the barrier Logra had erected around itself years ago. Upon their landing, though, they are stormed by a mob of peasants who believe that our heroes are the ones who put up the barrier.

(It had also not occurred to me that putting an invisible barrier wall around an island could cause its rivers to back up and the water level inside the barrier to rise! I guess I didn't think that the barrier extended all the way to the sea floor, but apparently it does.)

So, lots of good stuff. I like the glimpses we get of the different islands' cultures - the plaids worn on Skarr,

the unconventional monks and nuns of Bernica, and the bards of Gallis.

I do think that, if I were Aileen, I'd be more mad at my dad. He's been trapped on the sealed-off island of Logra for years, and Aileen didn't know whether he was alive or dead. Meanwhile, he and the other "prisoners" were actually pretty much living it up, running Logra from behind the scenes, not making any effort to escape. Oh, and Aileen's dad is in love with a woman he met there. Aileen's mother has died, but he doesn't know that. I get the impression that Aileen's parents' union was one more of practicality than passion, but I think I'd still be pretty ticked off if I were Aileen.

Overall, a great book. Fun, whimsical (I keep using that word when I refer to DWJ's work, but it's the best descriptor for the job!), clever, and adventurous. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

K.V. Johansen says

I was so glad this turned out to be great. Even in her final illness, Jones was still capable of intricate plotting, delightful characters, and beautiful prose. Sometimes an MS left unfinished at an author's death and taken up by another hand ends up reading like a horrible pastiche of the author's voice, with the tacked-on bits like clumsy patches, but this is seamless. Ursula Jones deserves much praise for finishing her sister's last work and keeping it so true to what DWJ might have written. It's a lovely tribute, as well as being a wonderful book.

Sherwood Smith says

This is Diana Wynne Jones's last book, finished by her sister. There are sprightly moments, nice animal companions, and the climax is sufficiently satisfying when heroine Aileen discovers her power at last.

But DWJ was very ill when writing it, and while it appears her sister scrupulously tried to match tone and storyline, the prose is flat for those who notice such things, and the characters sometimes silly. Moreover the story takes a very long time to stop meandering and get going. Not the place to begin with her work.

Cait • A Page with a View says

This kind of felt like a middle grade version of Sabriel or Earthsea at times. It also reminded me of The Secret of Platform 13!

So I liked the general idea, but really couldn't get into the writing. I know this story was finished by the author's sister, so I'm not sure if that changed anything. The writing wasn't necessarily bad, though... I just had the same problem here that I did with Sabriel where I was interested & bored at the same time because everything is so passive.

But "Seamus Hamish" is a fun name to say!

Emily says

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

New Diana Wynne Jones Novel is a Family Affair

And I've finished my last new Diana Wynne Jones novel. (I suppose I still have *Changeover*, but that hardly counts.)

The Islands of Chaldea falls more on the side of DWJ's middle-grade fiction, but it's witty and charming and has much to recommend it. I loved the *Islands of Chaldea* and *Aileen*, the future *Wise Woman of Skarr*. As this novel was finished after DWJ's death by her sister, I did consciously look for a shift in the writing, but I couldn't find one - the tone is perfect. I only had one complaint about the book, which involved its ending: (view spoiler)

Oh! And I LOVED the bards. (view spoiler)

So many of the elements in this story strongly remind me of DWJ's previous works. The Guardians bring to mind the guardians of the Caskets in *A Tale of Time City*. The land and the traveling band strongly reminded me of *The Dalemark Quartet* and *The Homeward Bounders*, with a bit of a Chesney tour from *The Dark Lord of Derkholm* thrown in. And, of course, *Plug-Ugly* is *Throgmorton*. It's sometimes surprising to see familiar elements show up in DWJ - because her works are so inventive and different from each other - but in this last book it felt fitting.

The combination of the pitch-perfect writing, the seamless transition from Diana to Ursula, and a plot that will resonate with so many DWJ fans makes this book a wonderful read. I wouldn't start here, but it's a lovely place to end.

Jessica says

When Diana Wynne Jones passed away, I immediately preordered her "final book," which arrived on my doorstep a few weeks later. It was called *Earwig and the Witch*, and is very cute. Somehow, despite my great love for her and her books, and the fact that I know people in publishing who are also big fans, I missed the fact that *Earwig and the Witch* was NOT her final book! Apparently her sister Ursula Jones was asked by the family to finish the book she had been working on when she died: this book, *The Islands of Chaldea*, which I discovered on the shelves of Foyles bookshop in London.

And what a treat! What a treat, indeed!

I mean, along with the thrill of finding an unknown book by a favorite author. Along with the fun of shopping in a bookshop in London with my sister. Along with the gorgeousness of this cover or the realization that BOOKS IN ENGLAND ARE CHEAPER IN PRICE BUT HAVE BETTER COVERS THAN IN AMERICA DON'T @ ME. Along with all that, this book is DELIGHTFUL.

This is classic DWJ! This is *Dalemark Quartet*, *Lives of Christopher Chant*, style of DWJ! Such a pleasure to read this high fantasy quest book, full of lovely magic, quirky characters, whimsical animal familiars, and all

the trappings of just . . . well, an excellent Diana Wynne Jones adventure!

In the afterward, Ursula explains that Diana always wrote straight through, from Chapter 1 to the end, and left no notes. So she just had to pick it up where Diana had left off and try to make the type of ending she thought her sister would have wanted. There's nothing to mark where Ursula's portion begins, and Ursula did a phenomenal job of writing in Diana's style. It has an excellent ending, and had you not told me I would not have known that Diana didn't complete the book herself!

During this recent trip around the UK with a group of writers, librarians, and other literary types, someone asked me what DWJ book I recommended for a newbie, and I was rather flummoxed. But now I have to say: this is not a bad place to start. Like I said, it's very much Classic DWJ, but since it's not part of a series, it would be a great initiation into the glory that is the Diana Wynne Jones canon!

Debbie Gascoyne says

This was such a pleasure. If not up to the standard of the top rank of DWJs work (*Fire and Hemlock*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *The Homeward Bounders*, it is solidly in the middle, and a much more satisfying "final" work than her most recently published books. This was apparently an almost-complete manuscript, edited and completed by her sister Ursula; I'd love to know which bits were Ursula, because you really couldn't tell, at least on first reading. It's a fairly routine coming-of-age story, reminiscent of her "Dalemark" series more than anything else, but with good characters, a likeable heroine (unusual in recent work), and a truly delightful and formidable cat. Recommended not just for DWJ completists but for anyone who enjoys a good fantasy adventure.

Chris says

The late Diana Wynne Jones would have been 80 this year if she had been still with us. As always with posthumous novels the worry is, will this work be up to her usual standard, or will disappointment cloud the reputation that she painstakingly established for herself?

We find ourselves in on an alternate Earth, one of the author's Related Worlds which are similar to but not the same as our own, chiefly because magic is always prevalent. The Islands of Chaldea (the real Mesopotamian polity of Chaldea was famed for its magicians) are Skarr, Bernica, Gallis and Logra, loosely based on Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. The four countries, as well as being separated from each other by water, are further divided by a magical barrier that has for some years closed Logra off from the other three islands. On Skarr lives Aileen, a potential young Wise Woman who despairs of inheriting the talents that she is supposed to develop. Unexpectedly she is sent, with her Aunt Beck, idle princeling Ivar and servant Ogo, on a journey to Logra via Bernica and Gallis, to help resolve the situation and to fulfil a prophecy. We sense the classic premise of the lowliest achieving greatness through discovering and using innate gifts and skills.

Aileen, with green eyes and hair "the colour of toffee", is also the narrator, diminutive in stature but growing in maturity. She describes how she is sent with some odd companions and a disreputable crew to achieve an ill-defined quest, in which barriers galore -- and not just the magical one -- are placed in the way of success. First they arrive on the tiny island called Lone, where they encounter a rather peculiar creature. Next, they

cross over to Bernica where they acquire another companion and another creature, as green as our own Emerald Isle is supposed to be. (There's an episode here involving humans turned into donkeys that recalls Petronius, Shakespeare, Kingsley and Collodi, who also riff on the theme.) They somehow get to Gallis where more companions join them, and yet another creature puts in an appearance. Then they have to find a way to surmount that final obstacle to reach Logra where, if the pattern holds, we must expect another beast to present another crucial piece of the puzzle. Will solutions be forthcoming?

Such a bald outline in no way does justice to the author's narrative skill, especially in her ability to recapture a young person's tone in relating a story. In addition, for those in the know, there is the delight of discovering how much she has drawn in the myth, legend and folklore of the British Isles to almost, dare one say it, make a political statement about individual cultures coexisting within shared traditions. And, in answer to the common question she got asked -- "Where do you get your ideas from?" -- her usual inventiveness is displayed in the way, magpie-like, she has picked up various shiny objects to line the nest of her story.

Let's start with the animals. The red winged lizard that appears in this story is associated with Gallis, not surprising as the emblem of Wales is a dragon. Less obvious is the talking green parrot that Aileen and her companions discover in Bernica (this name derived, of course, from an old name for Ireland). A green bird would be appropriate for Ireland, but why has the author hit on a non-native bird? Perhaps the legendary island called Hy Brasil to the west of Ireland suggested to her the modern country of Brazil, through which flows the Amazon; and in its jungles are the medium-sized green birds, good at imitating speech, called Amazon parrots.

The third of the four animals is a large cat, no ordinary beast this but one which can disappear at will, rather like the Cheshire Cat. With its 'long legs [and] small head' I wonder if a European lynx is meant rather than the Scottish wildcat, even though Aileen hails from the Chaldean equivalent of Scotland. The lynx apparently survived in Britain into the Dark Ages, and may have furnished a basis for the lions encountered in Arthurian legends as the Welsh Cath Palug ("clawing cat") and the chapulu of French Alpine lore. I think what confirms this for me is Aileen's nickname for the cat, Plug-Ugly. The Land of Lone where Plug-Ugly is found could represent the Isle of Man, but Jones has also woven in strands from folktales about the sunken land of Cantre'r Gwaelod, the Welsh Lowland Hundred that disappeared in Cardigan Bay as the result of human error.

And the fourth animal? Surely Diana drew on the traditional symbols of the four evangelists for inspiration here, coming up with the bull, symbol of St Luke, to represent Logra. (The parrot derives from St John's eagle and the cat from St Mark's winged lion; only the dragon deviates from St Matthew's man, though both of course have wings. Ultimately the four creatures derive from the cherubim who according to Ezekiel supported God's throne, appearing as man, lion, ox and eagle.)

Helpful Companions are the staple of traditional fairytales, where they aid the hero or heroine in accomplishing impossible tasks. Often they collectively form a group of seven, as here, and without them Aileen wouldn't be able to achieve her quest. For example, Aileen's Aunt Beck has the gift of visions; a wonderful character who must surely have been drawn from life, she unfortunately suffers from what appears to be a stroke -- though of course, this being a literary fairytale, this affliction is the traditional 'fairy stroke', the result of a malevolent spell, rather than the more lasting physical ailment that we know by the name. Meanwhile the Bernican monk called Finn is the owner of the wonderful parrot which gives more appropriate advice than is usual for these talking birds. Riannan from Gallis has the ability to sing spells, rather like her counterpart in Welsh tales who converses with birds, while her brother Rees infuses mechanical inventions with magic. And Ivar and Ogo have their own significant roles to play too.

Fairytales have their villains, and here the baddie is someone whose name aptly includes a Germanic element which means 'rule' or 'power'. We must be very grateful to Ursula Jones for finding a way to successfully resolve the very complex plot from a clue presented early on in Diana's incomplete manuscript. Ursula doesn't say what this clue is but I suspect it's the handing over of a purse, supposedly "for expenses" but of course nothing of the kind. I haven't yet spotted where the transition to a different author is, though I sense a change in style and pace around Chapter Fourteen. What is definitely Diana's contribution, however, is the introduction of a hot-air balloon into the plot. Bristol, where she lived, is host of a spectacular International Balloon Fiesta every summer, and she would have been very familiar with the sight of Montgolfier balloons floating across the river Avon and over Clifton.

The Islands of Chaldea is a love-letter to Britain, a hymn to hope and a celebration of true magic, which is the life of the imagination. While fans may regret her passing, whether as friend or author, this final novel is a fitting addition to the canon and one to be grateful for now that it has been completed in style.

Finally, I'd like here to report on a coincidence, if coincidence it is. Diana Wynne Jones and I shared a regular correspondent, the late Bill Russell. Bill, a professor emeritus of sociology, was president of the Pendragon Society, an Arthurian group for which I edited the journal. In spring 2005 I published an article I'd put together called 'A Concise Arthurian Bestiary' listing a number of creatures associated with Arthurian legends and folklore, including cat, dragon and parrot. Now Bill was in the habit of sending some of his complimentary copies of *Pendragon* to other correspondents, and as I'd included his review of Diana's *Hexwood* in the same issue I suspect there's every chance that he'd sent a copy of this to her. It's distantly possible that her choice of featured animals in *The Islands of Chaldea* was influenced or at least confirmed by the mention of cat, dragon and parrot in the bestiary article – though admittedly more likely that Diana was already familiar with their associations.

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-chaldea>

Andrea says

The last Diana Wynne Jones.

The feel of this book is a combination of *The Spellcoats* and *The Merlin Conspiracy*, and though I was a little shaky on the characters at the start, I was pleasantly surprised where some of them went. There are high stakes, and bad things potentially happening (particularly those donkeys), but rarely any sense of real danger. Not exactly a romp though.

I wouldn't put it in my top ten DWJ's, but I read it straight through in very short order and was smiling by the end.

Brandy Painter says

Originally posted here at *Random Musings of a Bibliophile*.

The Islands of Chaldea is the last novel from Diana Wynne Jones. Almost finished when she died and

completed by her sister, it is sad to think that it the last time we will get a peek into her vast and varied imagination. However, I am MUCH HAPPIER with this as her final book than I was with Earwig and the Witch being her final. While not as wonderful as my favorite DWJ books, it is still very good. And a not as good as the best DWJ is still far superior to almost everything else.

This is a review of an ARC received from the publisher in exchange for a fair review.

Aileen is the next in a long line of Wise Women. She is supposed to have magic and power, but she messes up her Initiation and is left wondering if she is bound to be a disappointment. This is hard for her living in the shadow of her Aunt Beck, who is highly powerful and a strong, decisive, no-nonsense personality. Aileen is smart and resourceful. She pays attention. And even though she feels inferior at times, she uses these situations as an opportunity to learn. When Beck is taken out of commission and unable to lead their expedition, Aileen rises to the occasion and truly comes into her own. She must think quickly and have much courage, and is a truly great heroine. The cast of supporting characters is as diverse and quirky as one would expect from a Jones novel. On the quest with Aileen and her aunt are a prince, a boy exiled from his land, a priest, a parrot, and a strangely magical ugly cat. I loved every single one of them, their interactions, and the dynamic of the group. Aileen and Ogo (exiled boy) are my favorites, while the others provided a good deal of comedy relief. Relief sometimes needed as the group encounters more than one Queen who wishes them ill will, a ship captain who doesn't seem to care whether they survive the voyage or not, cultural differences that almost see them arrested more than once, and finally the confrontation with a villain willing to destroy the world to gain power over it. Good good stuff.

The Islands of Chaldea are varied and the inhabitants of each have different cultures and norms, but they are all connected. You can see the influences of Scotland, Ireland, and England in them but they are their own places as well. The world-building is excellent as always and comes with no explanation. They are an experience and the reader does experience them thoroughly as the intrepid group of heroes makes their way through them in an attempt to reach the one blocked island that has been separated from the rest by a barrier. It is a fascinating tale and one that moves quickly. I did think some things at the end were a bit rushed and could have used more explanation. (How things resolved in Prince Ivar's situation for one. That was a bit abrupt.) For the most part though I was delighted with the story from beginning to end. It is Aileen's story above all and I love how everything worked out for her.

Fans of DWJ are not going to be able to resist this one, nor should they try. I was nervous going in, but that was soon replaced with joy and delight as I sank into the engaging and fun story.

I read an e-galley made available via the publisher, Greenwillow Books, on Edelweiss. The Islands of Chaldea is available for purchase on April 22.

Joan says

I found this quite disappointing. When Diana Wynne Jones died with this incomplete, her sister was asked to complete the book. She said there was a family council held to try to figure out how to complete this and it didn't get anywhere and it was turned over to her. She looked through the book for clues as to what Jones meant to do and found some and tried to finish the book the way her sister would have. Whether because Jones was dying or because her sister was inadequate to the job, I don't feel this story was a success. The beginning was wonderful. However, the story went astray and just didn't have the magic in it that Jones'

books usually had. By this, I don't mean magic: there was plenty of magic with the four guardians of the world who were mostly marvelous creations. By magic, I mean the ability to sweep a reader along and invite the reader into the world that has been created. The beginning had that magic. The book began to flounder around once Beck got injured by another sorceress. I can believe Beck was supposed to be incapacitated but that was when the story began to lose some of its magic. The heroine, Aileen, was supposed to come into her powers once Beck got incapacitated. That part went far too smoothly. One minute her Aunt Beck was the expedition's leader, the next second a 12 year old girl is the leader, and no one seriously opposes this switch, including Aileen. On a side note, it sure would have been nice to have her father acknowledge Aileen as his daughter. All he did was ask about her mother. I can see that but still, couldn't he have said something about being thrilled to meet his daughter again after a lifetime spent apart from each other? While I can buy that Jones meant the servant to become someone important, the bad guys just didn't seem to get their comeuppance really. Also, the story seemed rather rushed towards the end. I rather suspect that the last two islands were created by Ursula. The story just felt so different at that point. Although I loved the idea that the magicians of Gallis created their magic by singing!

I'm glad I read this last book by the great Jones. It is a way of saying goodbye to someone who certainly will live on in her numerous characters and stories. I hope more people read her books and keep them in print!!

Zach Sparks says

I'm going to be honest here, I feel like I cheated by buying an ARC off of eBay even though I've already preordered the UK edition (guys, it even came with a letter from Diana's sister Ursula about her experience finishing up the book!). I was already going to get it three months ahead of everyone else in the states, and now I have it and have read it two extra months ahead. That being said, I don't feel guilty for cheating, I really don't, not after how much I enjoyed this book. It has DWJ's characteristic wit liberally sprinkled throughout and I often found myself laughing out loud. I will say that it is very fast-paced, it almost felt like I was on one of Mr. Chesney's tours (Dark Lord of Derkholm) and I was being shuttled from place to place with the characters just to make sure that I didn't miss anything. There were parts of this that did feel like Dark Lord of Derkholm and Howl's Moving Castle, and I get the feeling that Diana's childhood in Wales played a part in the formation of this world, certainly the geography seems to remind me of the UK if it had been broken into separate islands.

I was impressed with the ending too, as it took elements that had been building the whole book long and even a couple that had just been introduced a few pages before and brought them all into a perfect storm of resolution. It may have felt a little rushed, but Diana's stories always seem to end with a quick flourish instead of a long, drawn out encore.

I'd love to say more, but, Spoilers.

Melissa McShane says

I'm going to have to read this again before I'm certain I know what I think about it. It feels a lot more like her early books, which for me is a plus--I haven't really connected with the more recent ones. I really liked the way their questing party came together and then had to deal with their responsible adult suddenly become not-responsible. On the other hand, Ogo seemed to get competent and mature awfully fast for someone

who'd been gawky and immature in a lot of ways at the beginning of the book, which I attributed to the change in authors. There was just a point--not, I think, the actual seam between Diana and Ursula's writing--where I became aware that it wasn't DWJ's writing anymore, and it made me sad and happy at the same time, because I think her sister did an excellent job bringing it all together. Such a wonderful surprise, getting this book after thinking there were no more to be had.

Fen says

I've had this book sitting on my Teetering Pile for far too long... but I'm very glad I finally got around to it! I must confess that I was not able to figure out quite where DWJ's writing ended and where her sister's began, but I don't know that it's important to be able to tell the difference. The book as a whole reminded me so much of the sort of tales DWJ would write in earlier years... almost more of a fairy tale than a straight out fantasy novel (at least that's the only way I can think to pinpoint the difference). It was a wonderful read and I suspect will hold up well to rereading in the future.
