

CHARLES DE LINT

WINNER OF THE WORLD FANTASY AWARD



THE
ONION
GIRL

A STUNNING NEW NOVEL
OF MAGIC AND DANGER IN
THE MODERN WORLD

The Onion Girl

Charles de Lint

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In novel after novel, and story after story, Charles de Lint has brought an entire imaginary North American city to vivid life. Newford: where magic lights dark streets; where myths walk clothed in modern shapes; where a broad cast of extraordinary and affecting people work to keep the whole world turning.

At the center of all the entwined lives in Newford stands a young artist named Jilly Coppercorn, with her tangled hair, her paint-splattered jeans, a smile perpetually on her lips--Jilly, whose paintings capture the hidden beings that dwell in the city's shadows. Now, at last, de Lint tells Jilly's own story...for behind the painter's fey charm lies a dark secret and a past she's labored to forget. And that past is coming to claim her now.

"I'm the onion girl," Jilly Coppercorn says. "Pull back the layers of my life, and you won't find anything at the core. Just a broken child. A hollow girl." She's very, very good at running. But life has just forced Jilly to stop.

The Onion Girl Details

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Author : Charles de Lint

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From Reader Review The Onion Girl for online ebook

Jim Leckband says

In which Jilly Coppercorn, who was the secondary magical manic pixie dream girl character from the previous stories and novels in the Newford series, gets the star treatment.

And since she was part of the supporting cast for all those stories, this is the novel where almost all of the characters and plots from those stories are name-checked. It was like "Battle of the Newford Stars" sometimes. This was the first book in the series where I think it definitely needed previous reading in the series - which is a good thing that it took #8 in the series to get to that point.

I won't go into the plot - but the main points de Lint is bringing up in this novel is child abuse, creativity and the unconscious, responsibility and blame, and of course the interaction between the World as It Is and the spirit world.

Jill says

A friend of mine introduced me to this wonderful author by giving me this book. It is a fanatastic blend of reality and fantasy. It makes magic and folklore believable and real. DeLint also tells many of his stories using the same characters, though they aren't really serial. You really get to know Jilly and her friends but you can read the books in any order. I love all of his books and urge anyone who wants to believe in magic to check them out.

Jordan says

I really liked this fantasy book and would recommend it, as well as Charles de Lint's books in general, to anyone who likes modern-day fantasy, especially if they like books that are character driven and maybe a little slower-paced than other stuff on the market.

Despite that, though, this particular book comes with a few strings attached. Not to start with a negative, but I'll just be up front about it and explain what the strings are.

For starters, it would be good to just point out that this book is not YA. I know not everything we review on the blog is YA, but a lot of it is, and de Lint is an author who writes for both teens and adults, so I thought I would make that clear.

Now, this isn't me saying, "Don't read it if you're a teen." This is just me saying what market the publisher wanted to put this in. It does probably have slower pacing and older narrators than YA generally has. It also has graphic and implied depctions of violence and sexual abuse that our characters struggle to overcome, which may deter some readers, depending on their age, experience and comfort level.

The overall tone of the book is optimistic though, without trivializing the difficulty of the characters' situations. De Lint has a lot of respect for his characters.

Now, there's still one more string, though totally unrelated to the first. Again, this isn't something that should necessarily deter you from reading the book, but it might be a turn-off.

I have a feeling that people who are familiar with Charles de Lint will already know what I am going to say.

The Onion Girl is what fans call one of the Newford books; that means it is a work of fiction that takes place in de Lint's fictional city of Newford, a place that houses many other stories which take place in a variety of his other books. Each book that I have read so far seems like a strong enough book to stand on its own. The Onion Girl is indeed a stand-alone story, but elements and characters from past books will sometimes slip in and out of future books, and that is very much the case here.

I suppose I should have been warned by this part of the book description to go back and read some of the previous books first: "At the center of all the entwined lives of Newford stands a young artist named Jilly Coppercorn, with her tangled hair, her paint-splattered jeans, a smile perpetually on her lips—Jilly, whose paintings capture the hidden beings that dwell in the city's shadows. Now, at last, de Lint tells Jilly's own story..."

Yeah, okay that should have been a warning bell to go back and read up on some previous stories before I read this book if I wanted to feel really solidly ingrained in the story. But I had previously read *The Blue Girl* and *Little Grrl Lost*, which were also Newford books. Both of those novels (which are YA) seemed pretty self-contained, so I didn't think I would have a much of a problem with this one, either.

And I didn't. At least, not a big problem. But this book felt slightly more disorienting than either of the previous titles I mentioned. Evidently, Jilly is friends with nearly everyone in town. As a result, de Lint introduced lots of characters in this book with names and very short descriptions of their character, like summaries almost. The book expects readers to more or less keep track of them all. The author was good at dropping in reminders about how they fit in with the plot, but as a reader previously unfamiliar with their stories, I still found them a little distracting.

It makes sense and fits right in with Jilly's character for her to know all of these people and for them to visit her in the hospital after her car wreck (this is not a spoiler; it happens right away), though. Maybe these small character moments couldn't have been avoided. But to be honest, even though de Lint took great care to not make it sound like name-dropping, I still felt slightly alienated as a new reader.

For example, Jilly once or twice mentions the fact that her friend, Isabelle, has the ability to paint beings and have them come to life and cause her trouble. It's a small, offhand, almost irrelevant comment that Jilly states and then lets go away, but it made my reading process come to a screeching halt, distracted. Whoa! That sounds like a big enough story to be it's own story!

Well... that's because it is.

(Apologies for the Amazon link. Someday I promise I will get a Goodreads account and then I will be able to link to books on a website that doesn't also try to sell you stuff.)

Anyway. After I got used to these things, I sort of just wrote them off as quirks of de Lint's world. This fantastical universe is like that: sometimes the characters (and you as a reader) get to experience whole alternate worlds and magnificent magical experiences, and sometimes they (and you) just get to see snippets here and there, mere hints that there is more to the world than just plain-old reality. So ultimately, even though these odd character moments were jarring, they worked in the novel's favor for me.

This novel had all of the strengths I have come to associate with Charles de Lint: A well-developed magical world that hasn't lost its sense of the mysterious or the whimsical. Strong, well-developed characters. A higher value in emotional truth than rationality

In this book in particular, I appreciated the nuanced good-versus-evil themes, with the recognition that not everyone gets the privilege to "fight" the evil in their lives, and instead must learn to grow and heal from it in other ways.

I'll also say that I liked it enough to go back and start in on the rest of the Newford books.

I can't believe I only discovered this author a few years ago, and I am surprised I don't hear about him more. He is clearly very prolific and has been writing for a long time. Urban fantasy/magical realism (this work seems to have elements of both) is a favorite of mine. It's all over the place in fiction nowadays, but de Lint's work is still better than some newer stuff I have read, and seems pretty timeless regardless.

If you have read this or other of Charles de Lint's books, I'd love to hear your perspective on them. If not, and if you like urban fantasy, I expect you will probably like this book—unless you have a problem with one of the "strings" attached that I mentioned before. In that case, maybe try checking out his other books first. Start from the beginning, like I didn't do. Or try one that isn't so entwined in other stories. I think I would consider *The Blue Girl* a good introduction; that's more or less a standalone and I recommend it.

cindy says

Once upon a time...
Once upon a time...
Once upon a time...

What a clunker. I heard from the rest of the bookclub ladies that it wasn't great, but I was willing to give it a chance. Mistake.

I made it to page 49 and refused to proceed any further after reading this dreck:

"I believe in a different kind of magic," Sophie said. "The kind we make between each other. The kind that comes from our art and how it can change us. The world doesn't need any more than that."

Ugh. Irritating FruitCakey Artistes who love faeries and travel to the dreamlands and are "small, fierce women." Ugh, again.

This is the kind of tripe that gives fantasy a bad name.

Also, the name of the main character is JILLY? Seriously.

Heather G Gentle says

This book was entirely bizarre but in a good way. It's a little hard to follow at the beginning going between

worlds and several different view points but once I got used to that I really enjoyed it. Raylene's narrative was tough to read but once I got to know her character even she was intriguing. I would have liked to spend more time exploring the "other world" -- maybe in the sequel?

This is a fairly complex read with many interesting characters and overall I found it a wonderful read!

Charles says

Charles de Lint is the Man of urban fantasy writers. I really appreciate and respect his ability as a middle-aged man to return to a place of youth and wonder, as well as inhabit and develop female characters. It is impossible to not love Jilly Coppercorn. Her sister, Raylene, at first monstrous, is also supercool. De Lint eases the reader into empathy for her and and understanding of the roots of her violent, alienating, and callous ways. Joe Crazy Dog and his friends are pretty much bad asses with big hearts. An excellent read.

Charity says

This was my second go around with this title and I didn't like it as much as I did the first time. I like the idea of the dream world and the faerie characters in the world as it is. I just didn't find it as fantastical as I did the first time. Maybe I will pick up another title by de Lint, maybe I am not done with his stories.

Jeanne says

I was actually rather disappointed in this book. I'd had so many people tell me I just HAD to read Charles deLint if I was interested in Urban Fantasy. This was the first book I've read by him and although it hooked me right in the first paragraph, it became quite bogged down and getting through to the end took sheer effort for me. Where he really lost me was in the middle where he gets far too pedantic and preachy. I read fantasy to escape, not to be lectured. If this is what Urban Fantasy is all about, maybe I'm not as interested in it as I thought. Everything I have read so far that is classified in that category has turned me off.

The subject of this book, Jilly, has some real social issues she's dealing with and the whole book turns into an exposé on the perils of child abuse, hatred, and pack mentality. All subjects I'd rather escape from than escape to. I have a couple of other deLint books in my "to read" pile that just got relegated to the bottom of the pile. Maybe if I'm desperate someday I'll give them a look. But for now, I think I'd rather visit interesting fantasy worlds where modern issues don't exist.

Arielle Walker says

I've read a fair number of Charles de Lint's books now - eleven at last count - and have been very aware of the darkness at the edges of many of his stories. While this one doesn't quite meet Mulengro in terms of pure horror, or even Moonheart's more fantastical evil, *The Onion Girl* is probably the darkest yet, because it deals with an especially human brand of awful.

Finding out Jilly's backstory is bittersweet. We now know where she comes from, and can greater appreciate her strength of spirit, but it brings revelations that are less than welcome, both for the characters and the reader. Luckily de Lint is skilled at countering darkness with light, and there is a fey calm running through the heart of this novel that makes for a captivating read.

NOTE: I've just discovered there are audiobooks of a few of de Lint's novels - including this one. The dilemma is: will it give another lovely insight and angle to his writing, or ruin my own imaginings of the world of Newford?

André says

[Significant child abuse, molestation, & rape. (hide spoiler)]

Chantal Boudreau says

As I've mentioned before, while I'm a fantasy fan, I am very much a selective fantasy fan. Mr. De Lint is one of those fantasy authors – in his case urban fantasy – whom I have read before and I will definitely read again. There is a solid dose of realism to his fantasy fiction, the type of gritty biting edge, in places, that I adore. His characters are far from perfect (as characters should be in order for me to be able to relate to them), they go through great struggles and pain and they don't always come out on the other end smelling like a rose. There is solid substance to this fantasy, not just spectacle and pageantry.

That being said, while I loved this book, it may not appeal to everyone. It is not a fast-paced read, nor is it a whimsical or flighty adventure filled with action. It certainly has its tense moments. It opens with a terrible accident and there are multiple incidents involving crime and violence, but much of the book is placid, emotional and introspective. It can also be a little difficult to follow at times because the narrative jumps around from real world to dream world and follows more than one character and chronology. I read it in drips and drabs between other things I was reading for review purposes and sometimes I found myself a little lost when I returned to it, having to back track a little to figure out where, when and with whom I was.

As a whole I think this is a wonderful book and well deserving of the World Fantasy Award. I'm fortunate enough to have a signed copy which I bought when Mr. de Lint made a local appearance here. The story is as multi-layered as the onion mentioned in the title and in my opinion, a firm five-star read.

Wealhtheow says

The problem with De Lint is he's just not nearly as imaginative as he thinks he is. His "flights of fancy" are flat and derivative at best. Even worse, in my mind; he can't write believable dialog, friendships, or young people. At all.

David Katzman says

This isn't a fantasy novel because it takes place half on Earth and half in a Spirit World that exists as a backdrop to all of reality. This isn't a fantasy novel because it features wolf-headed, shape-shifting original people and crow girls. No, this isn't a fantasy novel because there are fairies and Native American Earth spirits who share their wisdom. This is a fantasy novel because most of the characters in the story give a shit about each other.

That's right. Pretty far-fetched, huh? de Lint creates a magical world around the main character, Jilly Coppercorn, where she and her extensive collection of (let me say, roughly ... ten) friends are almost unbearably sensitive and thoughtful toward each other. I'm not talking about parent-child relationships here or lovers. I'm talking about an extended group of friends who *listen* to each other, visit each other frequently, and deeply care about each other. Now that's a goddamn magical world. Do I sound cynical? Wish I lived there.

For the first two-thirds of *The Onion Girl*, I was thoroughly enjoying the writing, and my excitement was building. de Lint seemed to be masterfully shaping the plot and building it toward an awesome collision between Jilly and Raylene, two sisters, one with inner light and the other with inner darkness. The good sister, in some ways, too good to be true. The dark sister, a violent con artist. It is perhaps because the energy deflated out of this conflict, the amazing collision failing to materialize as dramatically as I had hoped, that my doubts about the story came more into relief.

The Onion Girl's world felt a little bit ... precious. Those friendships too perfect, Jilly too perfect, too goody-two shoes. Her persona ended up feeling just too good to be true and that left an artificial flavor in my mouth. Mind you, there's a split personality at work here, in more ways than one. On one hand, the story is about friendships. On the other hand, it about the realistically portrayed horrors of sexual abuse. And the suffering the abuse caused was not soft-pedaled. But there was such an excessive contrast between the pristine goodness of the recovered Jilly and her sister Raylene that it had the effect of making the goodness seem sappy and even prissy.

I was also taken out of the story by the humor within the narrative. Or I should say, attempted humor. After a while, I began to notice that all of the various characters' witticisms fell flat. None of them cracked a smile on my face nor did they come across as credibly humorous enough to make another character laugh. It made me feel as though every character in *The Onion Girl* considered Marmaduke to be the height of comedy.

I interpreted the primary theme of the book as *recovery*. Recovery and related subjects—redemption and forgiveness or the lack thereof. de Lint explores how sexual abuse can drive people to commit terrible acts, both self-destructive acts and other destructive acts. And how some people grow through them and turn their lives around while others never make it through the tunnel of pain. Moderate plot spoilers (but not the ending) follow: (view spoiler)

What *was* unusual and rather inspirational about this book was how it dealt with real-world issues directly within a fantasy genre. So often fantasy novels deal with fantastical issues that only tangentially or metaphorically relate to real-world matters. I also enjoyed the writing. de Lint knows how to turn a sentence and construct scenic descriptions. I could picture all the events as he described them. Just as the Onion Girl felt as though she had numerous negative issues to deal with under her sugar-coated outer layer, I found layers of negative and positive qualities to this story. I didn't cry. I was just disappointed.

Algernon says

more like a [9/10] but I really liked it, and since Goodreads doesn't allow half stars I went for the higher rating. de Lint gets a little New Age preachy towards the end, but since I agree with most of his rants it didn't really bother me and the writing is very good. He also seems like a nice guy given the musical references he mentions in the intro and the computer geeky stuff that is included in the text.

I appreciate most about the book the way he managed to balance the devastating cruelty that the world inflicted on the main actors - Raylene and Jilly - with an attempt at redemption, at a positive outcome without being blind to the horrors and dangers of living at the edge of society. Next favorite theme is the role of myths and imagination / art in making us better persons, more capable of social interaction and communication. to quote the book:

"People who've never read fairy tales, the professor said, have a harder time coping in life than the people who have. They don't have access to all the lessons that can be learned from the journeys through the dark woods and the kindness of strangers treated decently, the knowledge that can be gained from the company and example of Donkeyskins and cats wearing boots and steadfast tin soldiers. I'm not talking about in-your-face lessons, but more subtle ones. The kind that seep up from your sub-conscious and give you moral and humane structures for your life. That teach you how to prevail, and trust. And maybe even love."

and

"There is no plan, no future laid out for any of us beyond what we make for ourselves."

one last comment : this is my first book by Charles de Lint. I knew it was somewhere in the middle of his ongoing saga, but I saw it mentioned as one of the best. While it can be read as a standalone, it was difficult in the beginning to cope with the large number of characters that I felt I was supposed to know about. I'm interested in reading more from the author, but I don't really have the energy and the free time to try to read them all in order. I'm not sure which volume to pick next

Judy says

Charles de Lint is one of the finest writers, and he writes a form of fantasy that is so accessible to people who don't necessarily want to read the fantasy that includes fairies, wizards, dragons, and castles. This is urban fantasy, it takes place primarily in our present-day world, in a city called Newford. The characters tend to be young adults, musical and artistic, well-read and complex.

Ambertronic says

This is the book where Charles de Lint delves into the history of everyone's favorite character: Jilly Coppercorn. It goes into how she came to be the person she is, and the catalyst that forces her to come to terms with her past. We find "magical-so-open-minded-her-brain-may-fall-out" Jilly has an unfortunate past that is echoed in many women's lives. The book also weaves together the colorful collection of characters de Lint has created over the years in his Newford short stories.

I prefer de Lint's short story anthologies to his novels because he has a habit of creating half a dozen plot arcs going that come to a head near the end. It's like that with ALL his novels. He pulls the reader along with several different characters and/or character groups and while the benefit is seeing the different character perspectives, it can be distracting. From chapter to chapter you will often find yourself thinking "where are we again?".

I would recommend interested parties read three of de Lint's Newford anthologies (in order: Dreams Underfoot, The Ivory and the Horn, and Moonlight and Vines) before embarking on any of his novels; it will provide the reader with background on the characters. While de Lint's Newford novels can be read without prior knowledge of his world and characters, it can help add to the readers understanding of the characters histories. Those who have read those anthologies will find it a little irritating having to read boiled down tangents of character history in the novels...at least I did.

indiefishsteak says

An amazing book that I did not want to let go of once I started the first paragraph. The story of Jilly, her incapacitating accident, healing old wounds, and adventures in the otherworld (or dreamland or whatever you prefer), of course. Unforgettable characters that question what it means to be bad or good and what causes those circumstances.

Be warned though that this book deals pretty heavily with sexual abuse/molestation and difficult backgrounds including homelessness, violence, and prostitution. I wasn't expecting it, but strangely I was not as blindsided by it as I usually am. The subject is treated wonderfully, healing and helping others being the foremost topics. To be honest I was surprised how well he wrote about some of these topics from a woman's point of view, and I appreciate that as well.

The Onion Girl was a powerful read that had a wonderful and active plot never stopping too much to breathe. If there wasn't physical action or suspense going on, there was active inner dialogue or turmoil that seamlessly took the stage and held its own. The writing style is engaging and empathetic. I love his use of different points of view.

I can't wait to read more of his work!

Masha Toit says

A difficult book to read. Onion Girl deals with the effects of child abuse, on the survivors and everyone else in their lives. I can't say I enjoyed it, exactly, but it is a compelling read. Charles de Lint manages to get you to sympathise with characters who in another book, would be the villains. And no - those are not the abusers. The abusers are almost peripheral to the story.

He also manages the incredibly difficult task of writing about fairies, sprites and other magical beings without seeming twee. I prefer "Memory and Dream", of which this is the companion book, but still worth reading.

Stephanie Swint says

I have never read anything by Charles De Lint prior to listening to The Onion Girl. It is a very good book. I was surprised at how well he mixed the faerie world into what would be considered our world. The book is dark and I saw in reviews that it was very depressing and hard to read. I would say while it is a book that deals with dark issues it is one of hope and redemption. You do have to stick with it to get to the hope and redemption.

The book deals with issues of sexual abuse, at times graphically but not pornographically so. It also deals with children living on the streets and the years work those who go through these experiences spend on healing and coping with the mental trauma related. I was nervous to read this because I have a very hard time when these issues are dealt with in a trite, superficial, or inaccurate manner. I am not an expert but did work in social work with these issues for a few years and found De Lint's interpretation to be believable and in a way healing. Many people who deal with childhood trauma turn to fantasy and science fiction as a release to live in another world. I was impressed with De Lint.

Apart from the topic, I also found the Onion Girl to be well written and captivating. It is a very interesting story that keeps you intrigued. I highly recommend this book.

Lyn says

Charles de Lint tells a vivid, Bradburyesque tale of contemporary fantasy in his Newford cycle of stories.

To be sure, this has the tone and style of the Grandmaster and a demonstration of his great imagination, but de Lint has given us a very mature story with adult themes and a setting of hard lives and difficult choices.

Jilly Coppercorn, a talented artist of faerie inspiration, and her younger sister Raelean have lost years from each others lives, but share a horrific and dysfunctional family origin. Both fled from the abusive home but in different ways and de Lint spares no details in his description of the depravity and recklessness of both women's lives.

But they also share the dream world, a place removed from our own and populated with spirits from multiple mythos and belief systems and even characters born from the fiction of artists. De Lint's extraordinary talent and skill makes this world building come alive and his characterization and dialogue are compelling and mesmerizing. He has crafted a rich tapestry of magical detail and backstory to compliment the difficult process of reconciliation and absolution between the two women.

Fantasy fans who have yet to read de Lint are missing out and this would be a good start, though be mindful of the sometimes disturbing themes (this is NOT YA fantasy).

Good book.

