



## The Last Stratiate

*LeAnn Neal Reilly*

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# The Last Stratiote

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**A stunning dark urban fantasy reimagining Charles Dickens' classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities* in which the age-old struggle between revenge and love plays out on the modern international stage but ultimately finds resolution in the heart of one tortured woman.**

Blood Law. It's the foundation of all human relationships, as old as humanity itself. In the Balkans, it's been enshrined in written code since the Middle Ages.

For Elira Dukagjini, a *stratiote*, an Albanian mercenary who loves Shakespeare and composes blood haiku, it's what drives her—at least until she meets James Goodman, an ICE agent pursuing the same trio of sex traffickers one explosive March night. For James, a Special Forces veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who earned a degree in philosophy on his career path, it's not just about bringing criminals to justice. The sex traffickers have kidnapped Mirjeta Gjakova, the woman he loves, at the behest of a man he burns to pay back. For Mirjeta, a concert violinist who escaped her Balkan homeland as an orphaned teen, the strict accounting of Blood Law threatens to collect a heavy debt: her life.

When Elira's blood hunt collides with James's pursuit of the kidnappers, the resulting trial forces her out of her predatory myopia. What Elira decides will change the entire course of their three lives, setting a precedent in the law governing human behavior.

Complex, gritty, and brutally human, *The Last Stratiote* alternates between dramatic action and a challenging, richly symbolic exploration of life, religion, and philosophy. It is a story informed by the intrinsic motives underlying our desire for love, lust, revenge, healing, and redemption.

## The Last Stratiote Details

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Author : LeAnn Neal Reilly

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## **From Reader Review The Last Stratiote for online ebook**

### **Jacinda Litts says**

It was a rather good book. I thoroughly enjoyed the philosophy portions. I wouldn't exactly call it "erotic". I liked the storyline as well. I could understand what the characters had to face, and I could understand what had to be done. I would recommend this book to anyone who can understand the philosophy and the aspect or approach this book brought. I had won this book from Goodreads and I am so glad I did. It is well worth the read.

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### **Teresa Lavender says**

Excellent story. So many layers to this tale. Not light reading! Definitely need to give it a second read to get what I missed. I won this here on goodreads.

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### **Debra says**

I obtained an advanced copy and immediately started reading it! As I got into it, it became instant that this was not going to be a book to my liking. It was confusing from the beginning and by the time I realized there were two stories being written I was at a point of stopping! I prefer a story line that you can follow and are not jumping around trying to remember who's character is who! This is not a book for the "faint of heart".... You will love/like it or not (hate is a harsh word). I was not a fan of this particular novel but would be willing to try and read others of hers in the future. I am giving it three stars to be fair that others prefer this type of writing. I will, possibly, return to it and finish it, but not at this time...

My best to her in future writings...

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### **Taylor Glover says**

I loved Elira Dukagjini! The characters in this book were solid and you either loved them or hated them. The plot had so many aspects and was told through more than a few of the character's eyes, which really kept it interesting for me. The whole blood law theory was a very interesting choice. All in all I would recommend this book. It was a great read!

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### **J.A. Beard says**

Disclosure: I was provided a free review copy of this novel by the author via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

It's been a while since I read this title. While the delay in my review was somewhat partially related to just

being busy, the larger reason had to do with my inability to easily decide how I felt about this book.

Although upon my first read through I thought it was an overall good novel, there were certain systematic issues that I found a bit annoying. After a few weeks had passed though, I realized I didn't care about those issues anymore and instead found the book's rich thematic explorations and strong character work, especially with its female protagonist, Elira, resonated with me.

At its heart, the novel is a gritty supernaturally tinged tale of revenge, tying together a deadly Albanian mercenary/assassin, the aforementioned Elira, and an American ICE Agent, James, as they both go after Albanian sex traffickers with their own views of justice.

Although the story is primarily set in the United States, the characters and plot elements are all driven by the current and past history of the Balkans. The author's intricate use of Albanian culture, history, and language generated excellent verisimilitude that granted this story a sort of gritty intimacy that many stories of this type, whether they contain supernatural elements or not, strive for but often do not reach.

Factions and families having long memories and desiring revenge certainly aren't limited to the Balkans, the upheavals and difficulties in the region throughout history did, I think, provide an excellent thematic context for the exploration of the meaning of revenge and redemption.

Though that's not necessarily literature's most unusual theme, the author does a good job of using that as a tool to also present some interesting theological exploration, blood-soaked comparative theology as it were, of the Abrahamic religions and their potential influences on history and the current geopolitical order. The supernatural aspects of the novel are tightly bound to these theological aspects in such a way they serve as fine universal metaphors.

That said, some of the aspects related to those themes also somewhat weaken the book. While much of the thematic exploration naturally flows from the actions and motivations of the main characters, particularly Elira, the author includes far too many scenes involving, when you strip it down, characters just sitting around having philosophical and theological debates. While I'm hardly adverse to characters having deep discussions, at times the juxtaposition between these scenes and the flow of the rest of the book resulted in rather uneven pacing.

I also suspect certain supernatural elements were supposed to be more of a surprise than they ended being. To be blunt, for a few of these elements, I felt like the author was afraid people wouldn't connect the dots with what she was trying to do, despite, in some cases, being pretty blatant even in their naming, so she went ahead and drove some of her character work home in a way that felt a bit forced. Some of these characters, accordingly, also didn't quite fully work as characters in their own right as opposed to just symbols or metaphors.

Fortunately, those particular issues mainly applied to a few supporting characters. In contrast, the primary protagonists were well-drawn and engaging. Elira, in particular, is a fascinating character and not just because of her taste for Shakespeare and blood haiku. The character masterfully captures the duality of human existence. She's actually one of the more memorable leads I've run across in a while. Although I can't say her particular arc was that surprising to me, the level of psychological depth brought to the character made the narrative journey fascinating.

James, incidentally, isn't boring per se, he's just outshined by the unusually fascinating Elira.

Even though it's almost been two months, Elira and her struggles linger in my mind, and the issues her character arc raised linger in my mind, something that's a bit rare for me these days.

4.5/5

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## **Werner says**

When she offered me an advance review copy of this novel, my Goodreads friend LeAnn Neal Reilly mentioned that she thought it might be right up my alley. In some respects, that was an obvious conclusion. I've always had a soft spot for kick-butt, fighting heroines; and being a Christian, I naturally appreciate fiction that takes the Christian message seriously and explores themes of guilt and redemption, without being superficial or preachy. And there are some other aspects of the premise and plot that have an inherent appeal to me as well; I can't discuss them here, even though they aren't spoilers as such, because the author wants readers to discover these aspects on their own, but for me they enhance the book. On the other hand, this is definitely a grittier read than the fare that I'm usually more drawn to. As I read it, my thoughts as to how I'd rate it were all over the map. I went into it with high expectations; at one point, would probably have quit reading if I hadn't committed to a review (obviously, I'm glad I persisted!); for much of it, was leaning towards three stars, though I flirted with two at one point; and toward the last chapters, raised it to a solid four. When I finished it, I decided the full five stars, for an "amazing" book, was amply deserved; because it does amaze, on several levels --and in a good way!

*"Stratiote"* is simply the Greek word for soldier; but it was a term particularly applied, in the 1400s and 1500s, to Greek and Albanian mercenaries who fled from their homelands' Turkish invaders and hired out to fight, first against the Turks for the Venetians and later in other European wars as well. So the title might suggest a historical novel; but our setting is actually mostly in contemporary Boston (which has an Albanian immigrant community). As the Goodreads description, which is copied from the back cover, suggests, though, it has roots in the small country of Albania (and neighboring Kosovo), the poorest and least modernized part of the poor and not-very-modern Balkans.

Our titular "last stratiote" is Elira Dukagjini (a.k.a. a "certified Albanian whack job"). Born and bred in a part of the world that's been a seething cauldron of religious and ethnic hatreds for centuries, that aspect of her heritage is very prominent in her attitudes. Her little sister and two cousins were lost to her when they were kidnapped into sex slavery, and she herself was the victim of a brutal gang rape that left her female organs too damaged to bear children. Not being of a gentle or forgiving disposition, she's channeled her rage and vengefulness into becoming, among other things, a vigilante on a blood vendetta against sex traffickers. This brings her into contact with our other two main characters, symbolically-named James Goodman, an ICE agent (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the branch of Homeland Security which is in charge of combating sex trafficking), and Mirjeta, the woman he loves, who fled the horrors of her Albanian homeland as a teen, but who, as the book opens, has been snatched by those who would drag her back there. The complex relationship that develops between these three characters is at the heart of the book, but they're well-supported by a full cast of strongly-drawn characters. (In particular, you gotta love Zophie!)

This novel has a lot going for it. Reilly's writing skills are top-notch; she handles language very well in bringing out the exact effects that she wants, and she knows the perfect way to handle scenes that in lesser hands could be a challenge. She's done her homework very well, even to the point of being able to write dialogue in Albanian (with English translations), and she knows her Albanian history and geography, etc.,

even to the point of identifying the tribal groups (Elira and Mirjeta are Ghegs, the main group in the north, as the Tosks are in the south --I did know that much before reading the book, but only because I've happened to read more about Albania than many Americans have, and usually remember what I read). Her wide reading allows her to enrich the book with literary allusions (I'm anxious to find the translation of the Scots dialect in that Robert Burns quote!). There are also quite a few contemporary pop culture references, but they're not just thrown in as a cheap way of faking texture; they're actually used to make points in discussion. (Since, as I sometimes admit, I live under a rock, many of these were unfamiliar to me, though I could get the points; I was familiar with the one from the latest *Sherlock Holmes* movie, though!) Music fans would also probably get more out of the way that music weaves into the story than a tone-deaf reader like myself. Finally, there's really powerful, creative and effective use made here of symbolism.

In one of my comments below, I suggested that Reilly's message here is pacifism. However, after reading the whole book, I've concluded that this isn't a true interpretation of her intent; I think that, like me, she does recognize that some aggressive actions need to be forcibly resisted and stopped, even if that means the aggressor's death. And I don't think, after all, that she means to equate that kind of defense with the actions of the anti-Moslem hate group I mentioned below (which DOES appear again in the book, and actually plays a key role). What caused my confusion is basically the fact that the theological discussions here about "Blood Law" come across to me as somewhat muddled (partly because would-be guru Jacob Stryver isn't the most lucid or reliable philosophical guide --and isn't meant to be!). By "Blood Law," Reilly seems to mean the Old Testament *lex talonis*, and to suggest that it's totally abrogated by Christ; I wouldn't go that far, because I think that in a fallen world there's a need for retributive justice, and that individuals CAN be "owed blood." But that doesn't mean that they always have to claim it, nor preclude mercy; and it doesn't allow for collective guilt, or the kind of hate that would prefer the death of the wicked to their repentance. I agree with Reilly that hate-based obsession with revenge is a corrosion to the hater; and that's a lesson Elira (and others here) desperately need to learn.

I'm not a fan of bad language or explicit sex in books; my general attitude is the less the better. There's some of both here; the f-word appears at times, along with some scatology and profanity. We also have a couple of explicit sex scenes and another incident (caution, rated R) (view spoiler). In fairness to Reilly, though, I didn't feel that she was deliberately trying to wallow in this kind of thing for its own sake. The sex scenes are somewhat revelatory of character, and Chapter One is more larded with bad language than the rest of the book is. Not all the characters speak this way; it's mostly James and Elira, and I made allowances for the fact that they both have military backgrounds (yes, not all soldiers and ex-soldiers swear, but many do, and it's always tended to be part of military culture), while Elira also comes from a society that's more earthy than Middle America, and has a tradition of hurling colorful invective at despised enemies. (Reilly translates the Albanian less delicately than I think it could be in places; I'd prefer "dung-eating pig," for instance, to the rendering here.) This was off-putting at times, but I gave the book its five stars despite this, not because of it.

I still feel that the Code Red hate group is unrealistic in terms of the real world; but the author is using it, I think, partly to make it clear that, even though all but one of the Moslem characters here are villains (and engaged in some very vile deeds, which unfortunately have a lot of real-world parallels!), she's not saying that all Moslems are like this, and not condoning collective hatred for them. Other than that, most of the negative points I saw in the book are minor quibbles. (Some plot points I thought weren't completely smooth; but in the main, Reilly crafts her plot very well, with pieces of it coming together like a jigsaw right up to the end. And a real page-turner it is!)

Given that action-heroine types often function in and are shaped by a rough milieu, I'm okay with the fact that they can be rough-edged, to a degree. But Elira vastly pushes the envelope on the "rough" idea; if characters like Red Sonya or Jirel of Joiry are likened to a Brillo pad, she's an industrial-strength metal

sander. She's not simply tough, hard-drinking, and sometimes potty-mouthed; she's also bisexual, very promiscuous, a cocaine addict (yes, so was Sherlock Holmes, whom I like, but he didn't have access to modern knowledge of how harmful drugs like this are; Elira does), and capable of dishing out mayhem that causes trained cops to vomit. Hanging out with her, as a reader, yanked me WAY out of my comfort zone. However, that wasn't ultimately a bad thing, because real people with all of her traits exist in the real world; and in following the Muse to create this character and let her be who she is, Reilly helps us to learn to empathize rather than judge. And I did come to empathize; Elira isn't essentially evil (though sex traffickers unlucky enough to meet her might think that she is, before they died!), and underneath the grunge and capacity for savagery, she's a hurting woman to whom the world hasn't been very kind. She wouldn't accept a shoulder to cry on, and it wouldn't help much; what she really needs is the healing grace of God. (And in Reilly's fictional world as well as the real one, that's a reality that it's not wise to discount.) Like all of us, she's on her own unique journey; and by the end of the book, she's a lady I honestly liked, respected, and straight-out admired. Yes, you read that right; and yes, I wrote "lady." If you read the book, you'll find out why; and you might feel the same way. You'll for sure never forget her!

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### **Natty says**

What a powerhouse. This is a novel so complex that I honestly don't know how to describe it. There is of course the interplay of faith, human trafficking, religion, philosophy and violence. Then there is the scientific explanation of all of those parts as well. The characters are strong, and undergo intense development throughout the tale. It's a rather brilliant job of weaving all of these disparate tales together into a cohesive whole that really blows my mind, I found myself more than once thinking "what the bloody hell could this story have to do with the rest of the book?!" while reading an aside chapter that then sure enough twisted, turned, and snaked back into the central story arc. Bravo.

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### **Jay Williams says**

From the very beginning Reilly creates lush visual images as Elira, the least Stratiate, seeks blood payment for injuries to herself and her family. Characters in this book are nuanced, deep, and hard to fathom. Scenes of action and gore are handled with a light touch, but vivid description. The reader is kept wondering about every character, and most concerns are not resolved through the surprising ending. Long after I finished this book I spent time thinking about the characters, trying to resolve in my own mind who and what they were, and what drove them. Absolutely the best thriller I have read recently, and possibly the best ever. I learned so much about history and religion, and the unique culture of the Balkans where "Blood Law" is the practice, and Muslim dogma opposes Christian. I can't wait to read it again and savor the nuances of the rich writing.

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### **Jenni Schell says**

This was an all around great read. I would recommend it to anyone that enjoys religion and history. That said it can sometimes be hard to follow. But all in all a wonderful story.

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## **Alan says**

Brilliant!

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## **Koeur says**

<http://koeur.wordpress.com/2013/11/12...>

4.4/5.0

Review: Contrary to the authors claim that there are no zombie-like virus' in the world, there are quite a few. Toxoplasmosis, rabies, sleeping sickness, leprosy, necrosis, lyme disease, mad cow disease, dysarthria and worst of all, Nodding Disease originating originally in the Sudan and spreading recently into Uganda. At least their wasn't any bad firearm descriptors and their use in a presumptive manner.

Fug me, this was both the best novel I have ever read, and the worst. Why is it so good you ask? In one word, the main character, Elira. Holy shjt balls, what a finely crafted character. The intensity coupled with a past rife with history, pain and love, held within a vampire waif whom is engaged in blood debt killings that started in Albania. The angel (or so I assume) Zophie, provides this engaging weirdness that creeps around at the edges of sanity. Both there and not, she is a great addition to the complex cast.

For me this novel was riveting until you got to the pages and pages of filler that mainly focuses on religious disparity and their contribution to the mental whimsy of one character. This is the authors pundit, I presume, in airing her knowledge and subsequent take on that particular arena of interest. While it provides some context to our characters situations and subsequent story-line, it tends to diminish the overall movement of the novel.

While Shakespeare may be interesting to some and of little regard to others, Elira's fascination with his plays and her ability to recite anything at a moments notice is kind of a neutral for me. I get that the author is trying to draw a parallel with Elira and develop her as a complex character, but it was really not needed.

So, I found myself completely absorbed and loving Elira's character and her story-line, then in the next instant I found myself flipping through quite a bit of historical religious filler. This novel needed a really good editor, or at least someone with an objective viewpoint whom could stand back and say, " you know, while this is great and all, there is just too much information to hold the interest of the common generalist reader."

I thought that the sex scenes, while explicit, really added to the story-line and her character. I was surprised by some of the sexual additions in the midst of the story. There is one instance when James is looking for Elira at a drama theater, and sees her sitting in the back row. As he comes upon her he finds that she is otherwise engaged with another. The author just bops you in the head all of the time. This novel does not follow in a classic structure. Even the dialogue can be weird and stilted, given the situation...just like in real life.

The cover art is ok. Lets get a close up of her with the eye brow and lip piercings. Her blue hair and makeup was described in detail, repeatedly, in the novel, yet there is no artistic rendering.

Get this novel, the author is definitely a refreshing talent, whom excels at riveting and drawing readers into a

broad tapestry of the fantastic.

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### **Lady says**

This book was awesome. It opened up a whole new way to look at vampirism... The cause or root of the affliction was very original and the premise engrossing. The lore for the names used for this particular vampire is pretty obscure and that makes you pay more attention than just using some well used name like lamia or revant. The story is also very believably rooted in Albanian culture and totally realistic because of that.

Elira is a very easy character to both love and hate. You feel as conflicted as she is throughout the story as she struggles with her heart's desires and her blood's desires she is almost literally pulled in multiple directions at once. Elisa grows and becomes more self aware she realizes the path she must take even while being beset on all sides with treachery and misdirection. Her story is an uncommon coming of age long stifled under regret and revenge.

If you do not understand the Albanian culture or the tenants of blood law I suggest you do a little research before reading this book to fully understand and appreciate it's beauty. Without at least a basic understanding or the culture and history you will be confused and miss a lot of the nuances central to this book. I really enjoyed it and will probably read it again to make sure I didn't miss anything :) I am a bit sad this book is a stand alone and not part of a series but I can't wait to read more from this author as I really enjoyed her immersive writing style!

\*\*\*This book is suitable for adult readers only due to mature story lines and graphic violence

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### **Howard says**

I recently laid my hands on an advance copy of LeAnn Neal Reilly's *The Last Stratiote*, due to be published in September. I read it immediately for two reasons. First, I had liked her first two novels. Second, I remembered my father saying of another distinguished historian of his day that that writer had written a very good first book and had been writing it ever since. I wanted to see if Ms. Neal Reilly, like too many other current novelists, had dwindled into formula. I was happy to find she had not.

She has, instead, produced a layered, complex story in which two conflicts are interleaved. The first involves James Goodman, an American ICE agent, and Mirjeta Gjakova, an Albanian violinist, with whom James has fallen in love. Mirjeta, in turn, is in America after fleeing from a blood feud in her native land. On the other side of the feud and organizing the pursuit is Imam Xhemajl Krasniqi, a warlord in (for lack of a better term) the Albanian Mafia with a considerable seasoning of Taliban-like religious fervor. The growth of the relationship between James and Mirjeta while he tries to protect her from Krasniqi provides the basso continuo over which the fugue of the other conflict is stretched.

This second, and, I think, more interesting contest is between the ancient blood law and the more recent religion of love, free will, and redemption. One could think of it as the Old Testament Yahweh vs. the New Testament Christ. The former is fiercely jealous, demanding of absolute obedience and worship by His

absolute rules. You can either be His unquestioningly obedient liege or his enemy, destined for destruction. There is little or no wiggle room in between. The latter speaks of love, understanding, and self-sacrifice among His worshippers. For Him, redemption is always possible for those who exert their free will to know themselves and seek it. Stryker, a sort of academic philosopher, is the theologian of the blood law and Aconcio, a lawyer, is its advocate. Zophie, who is more powerful than she first appears, represents the faith of redemption.

This battle is waged for the mind, conscience, and soul of Elira Dukagjini, a formidable Albanian woman with a taste for blood and an expertise in knife-fighting. As the story develops, we find that Elira is the last stratiote. I had to look the word up though I knew it was Greek. It refers to warriors or soldiers and becomes appropriate as we discover that Elira's origins go back to an earlier time when Byzantine Greeks were still a presence in the Balkans.

The novel is one of the darkest I can remember reading. There are Taliban, or their ilk, who do abhorant things. There are some sweet little old Southern ladies of an Evangelical persuasion who intentionally do things designed to desecrate Islam. Violence, or the threat of force, overhangs much of the book. Ms. Neal Reilly has presented a very much half-empty glass. And yet the picture is accurate and realistic. The history of monotheistic religions is fraught with barbarity aimed at people who believe differently. In St. Augustine's day, one could be arrested, punished, or even executed for heresy. The Middle Ages spent a great deal of time and effort preaching and fighting crusades against not only the infidel in the Holy Land, but against non-conformist groups closer to home, the Albigensians in France and the Russian Orthodox to name but two. In the seventeenth century, Protestants and Catholics in Germany had a theological debate which lasted thirty years, settled very little, and left a third of the German population unpleasantly dead. In the last month, the Westboro Baptist Church has visited Rhode Island to spread their peculiar brand of vitriol about gay marriage, of which they are certain that God disapproves.

One can argue that this dark view of humans and their religions is unfair, that religions are peaceful in their intent. This is undoubtedly true. But one should remember that for every St. Francis, there is a St. Clovis. Ms. Neal Reilly has opted to emphasize the dark side and to good effect. For out of that welter of pain and cruelty comes redemption. Elira uses her free will to make a choice, performs an act of penance knowingly and intentionally, and despite her long adherence to blood law, is granted redemption. The power of a great play or story is that within its context, one can suspend one's disbelief and live the lives of the characters. I have no particular beliefs, but I found Elira's redemption satisfying and true. Suspension of disbelief is why we are still able to read the Iliad and why we might benefit from some time spent with a stratiote.

Ms. Neal Reilly's latest is complex. It requires thought. It requires, and rewards, re-reading. This is not a book for television watchers who rely on the laugh track to know where the jokes are in "The Dukes of Hazard". One of my measures of artistic greatness is that I can hear or read something multiple times and see something in it each time that I did not see before. It is, in part, why I listen to Beethoven piano concerti and Wagner's Ring cycle. When the book becomes publicly available, I shall buy a copy and reread it. Before I do so, however, I will reread a well-known novel I have not read since high school. Just at the end, I discovered (or think I did) that the Last Stratiote is based, loosely and subtly to be sure, on that earlier novel. I want to see if it really is. I want to spend some time with Stryker's arguments and see whether I really disagree, or perhaps agree and, if so, where. I want to see what else I missed the first time by focusing solely on the plot.

I cannot say this is a "great" novel. If we are still reading it in a hundred years, then it will be. But it is a very good novel. And it does conform to the dictates of Prism's Rule, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."

