



Lancelot: Her Story

Carol Anne Douglas

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A young girl sees a man rape and murder her mother. She grabs a stick and puts out his eye. Her father raises her as a boy so she will be safe from men's attacks. She practices and practices until she becomes a great fighter - Lancelot. She wants to protect women, and she does.

Lancelot hears about King Arthur, a just king across the sea, and journeys to earn a place at Camelot. She vows to serve him, but fears that Arthur and his men will discover that she is a woman and send her away. Lancelot is shocked to realize that she is falling in love with the king's wife, Guinevere.

Guinevere is a strong woman who would have preferred to be queen in her own right, not through marriage.

Saxons attack Arthur's kingdom, and Lancelot finds out that fighting a war is far different from saving women in single combat. The savagery of war devastates her.

Lancelot: Her Story Details

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From Reader Review *Lancelot: Her Story* for online ebook

Susanna Sturgis says

The title and subtitle provide the gist: in this telling of the Arthurian story, Lancelot is a woman, a nobleman's daughter raised as a son after her mother is killed, so the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere is illicit twice, once for being adulterous on Guinevere's part and again for being between two women. It's a long book but a quick and enjoyable read. Most of the time I managed to suspend my skepticism about whether Lancelot could have pulled this off. I must confess, though: I'm not a romance reader. This probably explains why I was looking more more depth in the novel's key relationships, not just between those in the central triangle but between them and those around them. Gawain and Morgan in particular threatened to steal the story whenever they appeared. I look forward to seeing them again in volume 2.

Valerie says

Really, really enjoyed this book, though a part of me wants to reserve judgement until I read the sequel (please don't end tragically! I know you're supposed to, but don't..!)

Lancelot: Her Story is very different from anything I've read. It's fairly meandering and doesn't always seem to be going somewhere concrete—Arthurian slice of life, if you will—but that's also one of its charms. If you, like me, have wanted to spend more time in Arthurian legends but can't get past all the tragedy, this book (on its own at least) is a fantastic way to do so. I loved the friendship between Lancelot and Gawaine and I loved how Guinevere could be brittle and judgemental to some while being kind and loving to others (mainly Lancelot). Arthur is a more nebulous figure, and not particularly likeable, but that was very effective in context; being a good king does not necessarily require being a good person, and this book shows that. Lots of character development as the characters mature, and the story is told mostly from the perspectives of Lancelot & Guinevere, with occasional chapters from Gawaine and even more infrequent chapters from others.

All in all, a definite recommendation for people looking for something that's more an immersive read than a page-turner. There are a lot of horrifying images that might put people off (rape & pillaging, etc) but they're not described in explicit detail, thankfully, and the characters who matter respond to them with suitable disgust. Furthermore, I loved the little tidbits about religion and how the characters all differed in their beliefs, from believing in pre-Christian gods to devout Christianity to a practical apply-as-needed brand of belief. It made the characters feel more distinct and real in my mind.

Arthurianmaiden says

I had written an initial review of this book, before I could finish it, thinking I would leave it on hiatus for months and months. I actually decided to finish the book immediately so I changed my review. My first warning is this: I have read the first part (about 52% of the novel, if kindle is correct) in October 2016 and then stopped reading till May/June 2017. For this reason, I don't remember much of the first part but some particular elements, which is why my review might seem vague about the first part but have more details

about the second part.

This is the story of Lancelot, a woman raised as a man by her father after the mother's death. She loves other women and, of course, she falls in love with Queen Guinevere.

(view spoiler)

To conclude: I immensely enjoyed the last part of the novel, the way the plot thickens and the new characters are introduced and I will surely wait for the new book.

Jessie says

I do not enjoy histrionic revisionism. This isn't "A Connecticut Yankee" style "what if." It is a maudlin daydream carried on far too far. I do not like the author's style of writing.

Bib says

This is another book written in my favorite category - woman disguised and living as man. I never associated Camelot, the Arthurian age with lesbianism...till this book. The ending is left hanging, so for those who dislike cliff hangers, might want to wait for the series to be completed before you start reading.

Heather Jones says

There are few things more frustrating than a book that seems to be tailor-made to push all your buttons that ends up simply not working for you. Arthurian re-telling (check) set in a historically-informed post-Roman Britain (check) with cross-dressing female Lancelot (check) in a lesbian romance with Guinevere (check). Yep, should have been perfect. So believe me when I say that I went into this book expecting to love it.

Unfortunately, the premise is the only thing that the story solidly delivered. At first I thought I might have gone into the book with the wrong reading protocol. At first glance, the prose style gives the impression of being a YA novel (and one on the younger end of the YA range), though the blurb and marketing materials give no indication in that direction. Short direct sentences, sparse description, lots of telling and relatively little "showing". (Check out the Amazon preview to get a taste of what I mean.)

But other than the writing style, the book definitely doesn't say "YA" to me, in particular in the continual emphasis on a violent and misogynistic depiction of Dark Age society, and repeated (although rarely graphic) references to sexual violence. (One may debate the historic accuracy of the depiction, and I realize that YA doesn't shy away from sexual topics, but this aspect definitely didn't feel YA to me.) The other aspect that doesn't fit the YA paradigm is the book's slow and monotonous pace. While the characters are

continually doing things, there is little in the way of an overall plot arc. Events plod from one battle to the next assignation to another rescue of a damsel in distress. And then, after a great number of pages, they stop. There is, evidently, a sequel, because this volume ends before we get to the Arthur/Lancelot crisis, the Modred betrayal, and the other end-of-story plot elements.

While the story does an admirable job of cramming many of the medieval Arthurian tales into a single text (we get Gawain and the Green Knight, the abduction of Guinevere by Melwas, the begetting of Mordred, and many many more) it fails to make sense of them as a unified narrative. This may be due to too close a loyalty to the original texts (which were never intended to serve as a coherent narrative), although plotting and the identity of the primary characters is the only aspect in which this loyalty shows.

“Lancelot: Her Story” follows the modern neo-pagan version of the Arthurian mythos, in which conflict plays out not only between Britons and Saxons but between the fading remnants of an ancient goddess-worshipping society and the dominance of a sex-negative patriarchal Christianity. In execution, it copies the playbook of “The Mists of Avalon” and its successors rather than working from a more historic Dark Age context. Douglas’s Lancelot balances her way between the two cultures in parallel with the way she balances between two genders: raised a Christian and raised a boy, but in many ways more comfortable with the more accepting goddess-culture and with her female identity. (Note that while Lancelot spends most of the book passing as a man to the majority of the other characters, she is not presented as a transgender character and uniformly identifies internally with female pronouns, although she regularly contemplates topics of gender identity.)

Although one might think that a story centering around a cross-dressing lesbian Lancelot would examine gender roles from a critical and enlightened perspective, there is an annoying tendency for all the identified-as-sympathetic female characters to have a case of “I’m not like those other girls.” While Lancelot’s cross-gender upbringing might have been due to trauma, we’re given previous signs that she’s “not like other girls” in her tomboyish preference for running wild in the woods and her longing for spirited horses, along with her disdain for sewing and other feminine pursuits. Guinevere, too, is signaled as sympathetic by her rejection of traditionally feminine activities and her interest in reading and in riding horses. And much later in the book when Guinevere takes on a protégé who also becomes something of a substitute daughter to Lancelot, we know she’s going to be an important character because she doesn’t sew or spin well, her behavior is unruly, and she enjoys swordplay and learning to read.

Rather than critiquing gender roles, the story accepts the premise that traditional femininity is uninteresting, not admirable, and ill-suited to a protagonist. Most of the other women in the book are either downtrodden wives, manipulative seductresses, or dead in childbirth (or from sexual assault).

There were a few other issues that grated on me, but for the most part they hit personal idiosyncrasies rather than being writing flaws. In the end, the book’s worst flaw was that it never grabbed hold of me and sucked me in. I fought my way, step by monotonous step, to the end of the book.

JB Marsden says

Arthurian twist

Douglas writes of Arthurian Times with great engaging prose that paints the picture of ancient Britain. The

love story of Lancelot and Guinevere has the twist of Lancelot as a woman warrior, enchanting me. If you like jousting and courtly intrigue, this book is for you.

Neveen says

I had started reading the second book in this series and I had gotten maybe 100 pages in before I decided I had to read the first one to get a much deeper understanding and connection even though I was already enjoying the second book. There is only one complaint at times it felt they it was a lot more saying than actually doing, which worked in some places but other places felt as if you missed something but the characters and their interactions with each other are great especially women like Guinevere and Lancelot with other women. Inspiring them to be better and helping when they can.

Lancelot is a brilliant character because she strong, kind, and honorable. Everything you want in a knight. I also love that she proves every man wrong because she is equal o them in everything even if they aren't aware of who she really is. I didn't think I would love gawaine as much as have but he might be my favorite. His character development is wonderful and he brings a lightness to darker times. The comradare of the Knights is fun to read about.

This book just sucks you in within the first several pages and it doesn't let you go. It has everything I want in a book.

Sherwood Smith says

I have to admit at the outset that I've never liked the Arthurian cycle. Disaster turning on adultery has been a lifelong turn-off for me.

But there's one exception--this book.

Lancelot: Her Story is the first half of the familiar Arthurian cycle. Though the author and I only met a couple years ago when she came to Variable Paradise, we've been internet correspondents for at least fifteen years, maybe longer. During that time I've read a number of drafts of this book, as Carol Anne Douglas slowly reworked and layered the story into what it is now.

She's studied those earlier versions, and it shows in the episodic nature of the narrative, the easily accessible prose, and of course the famous people and incidents. But she added a twist: Lancelot is a woman. And Arthur and his Knights don't know it.

This is the female gaze view of the Camelot story that I'd hoped to see in *Mists of Avalon*, but didn't get. I don't mean to crab on Bradley's book, for she wrote the version of the story that she wanted to write, and it delighted (and continues to delight) its audience, but I was not part of that audience because it was too heavy-handed in its message, the characters too cartoony. The world unconvincingly black-and-white.

Douglas gets into sex, gender, and identity in ways that I found fascinating, especially in this storyline, where I know the general flow of what is to happen to who, but with twists that add new insight or meaning into the old incidents. And Douglas chooses a simple narrative style that is not post-modern, using language and worldview from an early medieval-feeling time when the Roman hold on Britain is mostly gone, but not quite, and when pagan practice is being replaced by Christianity.

At first it seems that this is another Arthurian with no magic, and indeed most of the characters pretty much don't think magic exists, or it is fading with the old ways, but Douglas has some nice surprises. Merlin is a mysterious figure who walks in and out of the tales.

One of the most interesting characters is Ninian, who heads a nunnery. Elderly, experienced Ninian remembers the old ways in the old days—and respects and celebrates them still— but there are times when she feels she must pray as a Christian. Arthur's Christianity is a state religion, his own theology more difficult to define (in that, and in a few other ways, he reminded me rather of Charles I); Guinevere's is surface; like her queenship she does what is expected of her, but hers is not a religious nature. Lancelot's is, and a significant part of her personality is her deep, sincere religious struggle.

Gawaine's take is a cheerful blend of practicality and an acceptance that the world is far weirder than he can compass: he was baptized because Arthur wanted him to be, and he goes to Mass without a problem, but his mother Morgause's pagan ways are also deeply rooted in him. Gawaine is another of my favorite characters, complex, puzzled, passionate and opinionated, loyal, smart.

As for Lancelot's identity and how it's handled. I'll never forget the Regency novel published in the late seventies or early eighties, in which, on the first page, the heroine when told she was to be presented at Almack's, which had pretty much become the Heyerian standby trope for introducing heroines, replied that she didn't want to--she wanted to, and I quote, "actualize her personhood." I put the book back down on the library shelf. The thing is, Jane Austen, in being the first to write about what women thought, and making it matter, was doing just that, but in the language and spirit of her time.

We don't know what Arthur's time was, since over the centuries the myth has hovered somewhere between the height of the middle ages in certain aspects, and earlier history in others. Douglas, in dealing with the matters of gender, identity, and the expectations of either sex, avoids postmodern language, keeping the myth in its timeless place.

To sum up, I never cared for the gloom and doom of the Arthurian cycle, with its slow, foreordained slide into shipwreck and misery, but this version I am following with fascination. The doom is there, in Morgan's complicated ambitions, and in glimpses of a very, very angry young Mordred—but given what I've read here, I believe that in *Lancelot and Guinevere*, book two, there will be found beacons of light, which makes me look forward to the second half of the tale.

Morgan Dhu says

I really wanted to love this book. For the wonderful idea of a female Lancelot, the best knight in the world as a passing woman, and the doomed love between Lancelot and Guinevere as a passion between two women. And I pushed through it, waiting patiently for it to 'click' for me. But it never quite did - though it came close at times.

I enjoyed Lancelot's voice, her innocence about the ways of the world turning to confusion, sorrow and pain as she sees at every turn the treatment of women and the brutality of war in Arthur's Britain. The telling of her descent into what can only be described as post-traumatic stress during the long sequence of battles against the Saxons.

Douglas clearly intends this book to be a critique that covers a range of feminist issues - from sexual abuse

and domestic violence to paternalistic attitudes that limit women's opportunities and options. These issues are, in fact, present in the experience of virtually every female character who is even mentioned in the book. Unfortunately, the author falls into the trap of dismissing women's work, both physical and emotional, and women's concerns about relationships with men, family and children, as being something to be escaped, rather than accepted as a part of life that needs to be valued and embraced by society and all its members.

Instead of a story that validates all the possible choices women can make about their lives, what we get is a story in which women like Lancelot and Guinevere are able to transcend cultural limitations because they are different, and don't like "girl's things." Douglas also falls into the habit of giving most of the other women in the novel traditional roles - spurned lover, manipulative bitch, subservient wife, wise old crone, victim of violence or the dead woman in the fridge.

There are other problems. I found it overly slow and meandering, especially at the beginning. The author has incorporated elements of all the Arthurian stories she can possibly fit in, all together into one text, and it often seems that they are there just to add yet another instance of male indifference or brutality to women and their concerns, as many do not add significantly to the story of Guinevere and Lancelot. Even Malory, whose classic work is more a compendium of tales than a unified story, was selective about his choices, and kept one thread, that of the king whose greatness carries the seeds of his downfall, at the core of his narrative.

Moreover, there is something overly simplistic about the way key decisions that will literally change the course of lives are made. The choices that lead to Lancelot being raised as a boy in the first place, Gawaine's choice to follow Arthur, Morgan's decision to betray him, Guinevere's sudden acceptance of her lesbianism.... These things all happen almost without thought, like the flipping of a switch. The motivations are hollow, we barely see inside the characters enough to understand how or why such drastic choices are made and justified. We are told, but we do not see.

As well, the style of writing is rather pedestrian. At times it reads like a YA novel - and one for the younger end of that audience - but the themes of sexuality and violence rather run counter to that.

The story also relies upon one of my own pet peeves - failure to communicate. I was rather annoyed with the long keeping of secrets that prevented Guinevere and Lancelot from realising that their love was mutual. Particularly when there were so many times that Guinevere could have made it clear that she had seen through Lancelot's masculine facade.

On the other hand, it was quite satisfying to see some of the less-frequently adapted Arthurian tales brought into play, and to have so much of the story told from female perspectives, so I can't say there was no pleasure here for me. It's just that there could have been so much more. For those who want to explore the idea of a female Lancelot, in my opinion the gold standard remains Jo Walton's duology, *The King's Name* and *The King's Peace*.

Catherine Schaff-Stump says

I first heard Carol Anne read part of this book at a convention, and I had to take a look. The book does not disappoint. The characters are fully realized, interesting spins on traditional characters of Arthurian legend. The book examines serious issues such as romance, war, chivalry, and love, all of them in a fresh way without becoming anachronistic. This book is a must read for people who think they've seen everything that

can be done with Arthurian legend. I look forward to reading the sequel.
