

A Land Beyond Ravens: Book Four of the Macsen's Treasure Series

Kathleen Cunningham Guler

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Reviewed by Tyler R. Tichelaar for Reader Views (8/09)

Kathleen Cunningham Guler has completed the “Macsen’s Treasure Series” with the publication of the fourth and final novel, “A Land Beyond Ravens.” Although I am an avid enthusiast of the Arthurian legend, somehow I missed the first three volumes, but this final volume can be read completely by itself without the reader being at all lost. Guler knows how to provide just enough pertinent information from past volumes for the reader without long summaries. Instead, the reader is continually in the thoughts of the two main characters, Marcus and Claerwen, so that the story is told naturally and effectively.

Marcus and Claerwen are a remarkable couple. They are completely Guler’s invention and do not appear in the traditional versions of the Arthurian legend. But Guler has provided herself with a powerful step into the legend without another retelling of it by focusing on characters somewhat on the fringes of the main storyline to bring alive what life was like in fifth-century Britain. Uther, Arthur, Morgaine, and Merlin are on the fringes of Guler’s novel, appearing briefly when necessary, but Marcus and Claerwen are the central characters. Marcus is a spy working for King Uther in various functions while his wife Claerwen is gifted with “fire in the head”—the ability to see the future, although not always clearly. Claerwen has also been involved in taking Uther’s daughter Morgaine to Avalon as a child to protect her, and she is significant, as is Marcus, in the future quest for the Grail.

The story takes place over the course of just a couple of years as King Uther Pendragon grows older, and as Arthur, who has been hidden away all these years, is about to become acknowledged as Uther’s son and take over the throne. During this time, Marcus is involved in several intrigues that range from dealing with the difficult minor king Cadwallon to the Christian Church’s increasing power in Britain. When Claerwen’s sister, Drysi, and a monk, Gwion, show up at Marcus’ home, additional complications will ensue for the main couple.

As a lover of the Arthurian legend, I was impressed that Guler does not settle for sword and sorcery, thrills, and a simple retelling of the legend. She has striven to be very historically accurate—as much as possible considering fifth-century Britain remains shrouded in mystery as to what really happened. She is faithful to the Welsh and Celtic names, customs, and beliefs of the time as much as possible, and although the items of Macsen’s Treasure are her own invention, the idea hearkens back

to the Welsh tradition of the Thirteen Treasures of Britain. The atmosphere of the novel is somewhat dark, but also extremely realistic and authentic. The characters are real, their motivations reasonable, and nowhere were there bizarre or unbelievable plot twists. "A Land Beyond Ravens" is one of the most historically realistic Arthurian novels ever written, a thoroughly mature work that belongs beside such classic Arthurian novels as Rosemary Sutcliffe's "Sword at Sunset" and Mary Stewart's "Merlin Trilogy."

Above all, what I enjoyed about this novel, and would have enjoyed even if it were not Arthurian, was to read about the relationship between Marcus and Claerwen. I am no fan of romance, but this novel went beyond romance to creating a beautiful and realistic portrait of love between a husband and wife, a love that has developed over many years. The scenes between them are tender, never filled with eroticism to entertain the reader, but simply heartfelt. Claerwen is deeply in love with her husband, constantly aware of his masculinity, and Marcus is good, kind, protective and loyal to his wife. It is rare that a married couple is depicted so perfectly in fiction. It is the kind of relationship that makes a reader envious and satisfied at the same time.

My only complaint is that this series has ended. Among the more than one hundred Arthurian novels I have read, the "A Land Beyond Ravens" is among the dozen or so most deserving to become classics of the genre. I will console myself by reading the first three novels in the series and hoping Guler considers writing more.