



City of Strife

Claudie Arseneault

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Isandor, City of Spires.

A hundred and thirty years have passed since Arathiel last set foot in his home city. Isandor hasn't changed—bickering merchant families still vie for power through eccentric shows of wealth—but he has. His family is long dead, a magical trap has dulled his senses, and he returns seeking a sense of belonging now long lost.

Arathiel hides in the Lower City, piecing together a new life among in a shelter dedicated to the homeless and the poor, befriending an uncommon trio: the Shelter's rageful owner, Larryn, his dark elven friend Hasryan, and Cal the cheese-loving halfling. When Hasryan is accused of Isandor's most infamous assassination of the last decade, what little peace Arathiel has managed to find for himself is shattered. Hasryan is innocent... he thinks. In order to save him, Arathiel may have to shatter the shreds of home he'd managed to build for himself.

Arathiel could appeal to the Dathirii—a noble elven family who knew him before he disappeared—but he would have to stop hiding, and they have battles of their own to fight. The idealistic Lord Dathirii is waging a battle of honour and justice against the cruel Myrian Empire, objecting to their slavery, their magics, and inhumane treatment of their apprentices. One he could win, if only he could convince Isandor's rulers to stop courting Myrian's favours for profit.

In the ripples that follow Diel's opposition, friendships shatter and alliances crumble. Arathiel, the Dathirii, and everyone in Isandor fights to preserve their homes, even if the struggle changes them irrevocably.

City of Strife is the first installment of the City of Spires trilogy, a multi-layered political fantasy led by an all LGBTQIAP+ cast. Fans of complex storylines criss-crossing one another, elves and magic, and strong friendships and found families will find everything they need within these pages.

City of Strife Details

Date : Published February 22nd 2017 by The Kraken Collective

ISBN :

Author : Claudie Arseneault

Format : ebook 375 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Glbt, Queer, Lgbt, Fiction

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From Reader Review City of Strife for online ebook

Sarah (CoolCurryBooks) says

Trigger warning: abuse

I picked up City of Strife because I heard it was a second world fantasy that had a lot of aro and ace characters. Turns out the entire main cast is queer!

In the city of Isandor, merchant families vie for power. But a new threat looms... The Myrian Empire aims to expand, and the first step is to conquer the city-state of Isandor. Yet the merchant families will not recognize the threat the Myrian enclave poses. The only one willing to fight the Myrians are the House Dathirii, led by an idealistic young lord. People throughout the city — from the noble's towers to the slums of the lower city — will find themselves charting the course for Isandor's future.

I generally liked the characters, which was a good thing because oh boy were there tons of characters. Not just characters generally, there were tons of POV characters! Off the top of my head, I can count twelve, and I think I may be missing some. At times it could be a bit overwhelming. While I may have liked most of the POV characters, it doesn't mean they're all good people. My favorite was probably Nevian, an aro ace wizard student with an abusive mentor. Yet, he's probably one of the most morally grey characters of the bunch, willing to throw others under the bus to ensure his own survival.

On the other hand, I did find the character cast slanted male. And most important relationships in the book (which are all largely platonic — important doesn't equal romantic) are between male characters or characters of different genders. The only relationship we saw between women was a wizard in the Myrian enclave trying to protect her student from Nevian's sadistic master. It's implied that Branwen (House Dathirii's spymaster) and her aunt Camilla care for each other, but they only have a short scene together. I really hope the sequel pays more attention to female characters and the relationships between them.

Whenever I read a second-world fantasy book, I try to figure out what the gender norms are. I had a bit of trouble doing so for City of Strife. At first I read Isandor as egalitarian, but then one character says sexist insults to a female guard and gets called out on it. Since sexism is clearly present, it's obviously not egalitarian. My best guess is that Isandor's mostly like our world in that regard — it's someplace that likes to think of itself as egalitarian when it really isn't.

My confusion over cultural gender norms may be a result of the generally thin world building. There's some interesting ideas at play in Isandor's setting. Particular highlights include the fire magic and religion of the Myrians and the city being built out of towers, bridges, stairs, and walkways. It gave a whole new meaning to "upper" and "lower" class! However, while City of Strife has some interesting world building ideas, the setting never felt fully immersive. It's hard to describe, but the best fantasy settings feel almost like they're real places, so vivid they leap off the page. Unfortunately, City of Strife never quite got there for me. Apparently it's based on the author's RPG campaign? It made sense in hindsight, given the elves and halflings and what not. Maybe that explains some of the trouble I had with the world building.

A topic that continually interests me is use of language in fantasy novels. What words do fantasy authors use? Should "modern" words be avoided? What constitutes "modern"? And how does this relate to identity labels for concepts such as gender and sexual orientation? Presumably, the fantasy characters are speaking in a different language, so is the story being "translated" into modern English? It's an interesting topic, and one

I've thought about exploring more in depth. Based on *City of Strife*, Claudie Arseneault comes down on the side of using language regardless of how modern it feels. This includes everything from slang such as "okay" to words such as "bisexuality," "sexism," and "transphobia," that I don't know if I'd ever seen in a second-world fantasy novel before.

In the end, the most important thing is that I had fun with *City of Stife*. It was easy to read, maybe a bit of a popcorn book. Plus, I really enjoyed reading a fantasy novel with a predominantly queer cast, particularly one that was aro and ace inclusive. I'd like to read the sequel, and since *City of Stife* ended on a cliffhanger, sooner is better than later. It's a book I wouldn't hesitate to recommend to anyone looking for queer fantasy novels.

Originally posted on The Illustrated Page.

Chasia Lloyd says

Lush worldbuilding and a wide variety of characters, this book has it all. If queer political fantasy is your jam, you need this.

I struggled a lot with the opening because of the enormous cast of characters being introduced in a hurry, but I cared for everyone almost instantly and wanted to push through. I got through the last 2/3 of the book swiftly though!

*** also this is VERY aro and ace friendly !! ***

Bryn Hammond says

I was uncertain for the first third, convinced for the second, and way into it for the third. Far too often novels happen to me the other way around.

Populated by interesting ppl, and with a shelter for the homeless at the heart of the story.

I got this off a Twitter list of SFF-with-maginalized (not YA). I went and bought half the list. Off to a fine start.

LG (A Library Girl's Familiar Diversions) says

City of Strife is set in the bustling city of Isandor and stars a huge cast of characters, each with intersecting storylines, histories, and paths. A few examples:

- Arathiel, a human whose ill-fated journey to find a cure for his sick sister transformed him, dulling all his senses and giving him a much longer lifespan. It's been over 130 years since he last set foot in Isandor, and he now feels like an unwelcome stranger there. The one place he feels comfortable: the Shelter, which provides food and a place to sleep to anyone who needs it. It's there that he becomes friends with Larryn, the

Shelter's owner, Cal, a halfling, and Hasryan, a dark elf.

- Nevian, an apprentice mage in the Myrian enclave. He lives in constant fear of Master Avenazar, who killed his previous tutor and now regularly abuses him. Nevian's only ally is Varden, a High Priest of Keroth and former Myrian slave. Unfortunately, Varden, too, must tread carefully around Avenazar.

- Lord Diel Dathirii, an elf and head of the Dathirii family. When he witnesses Avenazar publicly torturing Nevian, he decides that it's time to finally take a stand against the Myrians, who have thus far been permitted to live by their own laws while in their enclave in Isandor. The rest of his family will stand by his decisions and support him, but that may not be enough if Isandor's other noble families decide to abandon House Dathirii to face the Myrians alone.

City of Strife is one of the very few (perhaps only?) ARCs I've ever requested from an author. I was interested in the book's LGBTQIA+ cast and "found family" aspect, and the author had a nice online form that, if I remember correctly, only asked for interested reviewers' email addresses (easy! low stress! didn't require NetGalley or a Twitter DM!). The long book description concerned me a little and made it difficult to tell what the book would be like, but I figured I'd give it a shot.

I'm glad I did, because I enjoyed it immensely, although I'm now unhappy that I'll have to wait who knows how long for Book 2 to come out. A word of warning: *City of Strife* ends with lots of things still unresolved and several characters in peril. Crossing my fingers that none of the characters I care about get killed off in the next two books.

One thing that dismayed me when I first started reading: the many, many POVs. The book was written in third person, but chapters/sections focused on different characters' perspectives. Almost every named character had a chapter or section written from their POV, and it wasn't until I'd gotten 15% into the book that a POV repeated itself.

The POVs turned out to be both the book's strength and its weakness. I loved gradually learning how the various characters' stories were interrelated - what the stuff at the Shelter had to do with House Dathirii, who Nevian was secretly visiting for magic lessons, what would prompt Arathiel to reveal his noble blood to his friends at the Shelter and/or Isandor's noble families, etc. However, all those POVs and complex and interrelated storylines meant that some of my favorite characters and storylines didn't get as much page-time as I'd have liked. For example, Arathiel and, eventually, Hasryan ended up being my favorite characters, and I particularly looked forward to seeing Arathiel find a place for himself at the Shelter with Larryn, Cal, and Hasryan. Unfortunately, there wasn't nearly as much on-page friendship-building as I expected, and one character's actions near the end of the book destroyed my impression of the trio as an overall warm and welcoming group.

I much preferred House Dathirii, which, aside from a couple exceptions I'm hoping that one of the next couple books will cover in more detail, was largely just as warm and welcoming as it initially appeared to be. I particularly loved Camilla. Everyone could use someone like Camilla in their lives.

House Dathirii brings me to another aspect of the book I both loved and had problems with: the politics. I love fantasy and sci-fi books with lots of politics, and this one had House Dathirii clashing with the Myrian enclave and struggling to get support, a 10-year-old murder that was relevant to current politics, and more. Fascinating stuff. Unfortunately, I prefer when there's at least one character who's incredibly skilled at navigating politics, and this book didn't have that, at least not front-and-center. Avenazar was so lacking in self-control that I was amazed he'd never done anything in Myria to earn himself an execution. Maybe he

had really good family connections protecting him? And then there was Diel: principled, idealistic, and almost completely lacking in the ability to sit back, pick his battles, and maybe go at things a little more subtly and indirectly. At least he recognized that it was other members of his family who did the heavy lifting when it came to making sure the family survived whatever fight he'd chosen to involve them all in.

All in all, despite my complaints this was a riveting read, and I wish the next couple books were out already. In the meantime, I plan on getting myself a copy of Arseneault's *Viral Airwaves*.

(Original review posted on A Library Girl's Familiar Diversions.)

Mo says

Queer elves, queer elves, queer elves, queer elves!!!!

Hey, I take my joy where I can find it. ^_(_?)_/_ And this wonderful fantasy lifted me out of a reading slump with its magic, heartbreakingly lovely characters, intrigue, really good caper, multiple story lines centered around friendships, and delightful LGBTQA rep.

Lucille says

[Actual rating : 4,5/5]

I decided to buy and read this book after finding out it was from the person who had created the *Aromantic or Asexual Speculative Fiction Database*. I always feel more inclined to read a book when I have followed an author on social medias for a while and seen what a nice person they are (nobody wants to support bigots right?)

So I was super excited to get this book and I ended up reading it in a week! It could have been less but unfortunately I had some exams. To be more precise, I read half of this book on a Saturday morning, tucked in bed, only getting out when I was almost done and because eating had become imperative.

This novel is sold as a “multi-layered political fantasy”; I almost didn't pick it up because I'm not a big fan of politics in books, but this first instalment wasn't too heavy on this! Since the story focuses on different characters across the city, the political aspect sure plays a part but it was never too much of it. There was actually only two characters whose life were really intertwined with the political aspect (so far).

It also is sold as a book “led by an all QUILTBAG cast” and that was AWESOME! The author is on the aro-ace spectrum and so are some of the characters (though, never using the label, but putting into words their identity in a clear and casual way). The novel isn't focusing on the characters sexual or romantic/platonic orientation, but it does come up in the story at some point, because that's a part of who they are. There is diversity everywhere, such as a minor character whose chronic pain is mentioned, a healer who prefers people to use the pronoun “they/them” to refer to them, a colour blind person, etc.

“But if Nevian didn't correct Isra's racist mistake, was he any better?”

The found family theme is one of my all-time favourites and it is strong in this novel. There were really a large number of characters but they aren't introduced all at once, it was very well done and I never got

confused on who was who and what was their part on the story. Some were more present than others, some felt like they would get a more important role in the sequels, but overall I liked to learn about all these diverse characters from all over the city. I liked how their storylines met, how deep friendships formed and their compassion. It's really the ingredient that a book needs for me to call it a favourite and for me to want to read it again someday. A welcoming team of friends, a great diversity of characters and acceptance of everyone above all: you get me as a loyal reader 4ever. Not saying they're all perfect cinnamon rolls, some have prejudices, others are hostile to new of different people. But you get a feeling that their prejudices are going to be challenged even more on the next instalment.

"You're a lady. You should find a nice decoration to brighten up this place."

"Charming. Your sexism is an appreciated change from my favourite colleague's repeated transphobia. I'm glad the bigot club is diversifying a little."

City of Strife ended up in a kinda abrupt way. I didn't remember there was going to be a bonus short story at the end of the physical copy so I thought there was going to be more things happening and... it didn't. But it was a way for me to realise I really wanted to know more, to know what was going to happen to those characters and how the fate of this gorgeous city was going to play out. Stressful things happened, but this nice addition at the end about the way two characters met years and years ago is the perfect way to let the reader close the book with a smile on their face nonetheless.

"Nevian would never understand that kind of desire – he had never even experienced attraction and doubted he one day would – and physical proximity unnerved him. He waited, wishing people were more reasonable about this whole sex thing. Because, really? The middle of the day?"

This novel is all-indie, like the author says in the Acknowledgment, which explains the slight editing mishaps I saw. For instance, at times the spaces between the full-stop and following word was missing, sometimes –but less often – it happened between words. Like "and he" became "andhe" and I was a little bit lost, ended up checking wordreference because I thought it was an English word I didn't know haha!

Anyway, nothing serious but I felt I needed to mention it in this review.

I asked the author on twitter what had caused those mistakes, and she told me something happened during formatting, she is checking everything and it should be back to normal in a few days. People who bought the kindle edition should even get a warning to update to the clean version once it's done!

Once a mistake has been made once, it won't happen twice ?

Still, this is not something that will deter me from buying the next instalments of this trilogy, and the other books from Claudie Arseneault!

Really looking forward to read *Viral Airwaves* next! Which also has a gorgeous cover!

Trigger warnings can be found on the author's website (there are quite a few!)

RoAnna Sylver says

"How long had Arathiel hung to the side, a spectre watching events unfold, uncertain he deserved to participate? Not anymore."

* * *

This is another book where I'm not even certain how to begin. There is so much good, so much importance.

This is not a ghost story. But this is a story about what it is to be a ghost. To live on the fringes (of society, disenfranchised and ignored), of human interaction (keeping to the sidelines, the shadows, keeping silent, watching as others live their lives but never joining them), and of enormous times of upheaval. In all of these cases, there comes a time when the invisible are seen, when the silent speak, and when ghosts become vitally, desperately alive.

And that is my abstract, borderline-incoherent description of the emotional heart of City of Strife.

The less-figurative heart would probably be Cal.

I loved him before I even read the whole book. Snippets were enough to convince me of his awesomeness, and made me very much want the entire thing. I love this sweet, warm, funny, chubby, adorable, perceptive, welcoming, clever, brave luck-priest so much. I love the fact that he subverts just about every awful preconception and stereotype of aromantic asexual characters as being cold, aloof, uncaring, un-living, "inhuman." (He's not human, but a lot of people aren't in this book - and a lot ARE aro/ace and amazing.)

I hate how he's often treated by the people around him (though I'm confident Larryn at least will get better about this and at least he's actively Trying), and in a couple updates said I should just make a sign that reads "STOP BEING MEAN TO CAL" and hold it up at opportune moments. (I STILL MIGHT.) I hate the stark injustices and pain inflicted (often by unequal, unbalanced and un-compassionate systems) that so many people in this book have to endure, whether from institutional prejudice, or outright abuse.

But I love how they're portrayed. (As things to be overcome not by sucking it up and enduring, but by coming together and sharing strength, resources and support.) I love how everything is so very connected, and the smallest and most disparate events turn out to be integral. A city's civil war nearly starts because a cruel wizard abuses his apprentice. The place was a powder keg already, but this IS the final straw, and it very well should be. "Small" evils like this are no less deadly than the "big" ones. They should mean war. There should be revolution. Ghosts should be revealed and dirty deeds done in the shadows dragged to the light.

I just can't gush enough about the character interactions either. The friendships, established and growing bonds are so wonderfully tangible and sweet and *important.* A good piece of the core cast is aro/ace and their connections (growing queerplatonic and otherwise) are shown as every single bit as important as romantic and sexual relationships.

(Speaking of romance though, Diel and Jaeger have my heart entirely and I can't get enough of them. I don't think I ever could! For a while I was actually worried something awful would happen to them simply because I've been burned so badly by so many books that when I love a ship TOO MUCH, I start to worry. This can't possibly be real, we can't possibly get to keep them? But we do. And I'm honestly more grateful than I've been in a long time.)

I just love everyone so much. I love Arathiel's searching and trying to regain equilibrium and find pieces he recognizes of a life interrupted. I love Hasryan's fragile trust and determination to power through horrible pain, and even his reluctance to believe he's safe, and doesn't have to. I love Branwen's brilliance for disguises and subterfuge, changing the course of a city without confrontation or bloodshed, and I love HER powerful love for her family. I love Nevian and Varden and Vellien and Camilla (AND LARRYN, YES) and all their brilliant, interwoven connections, and if I started on any of them I'd never stop.

I just want more. And I hope you read and want more too.

Hélène Louise says

This book was a very nice read, fluid and interesting (note : the presentation of the book is quite obscure and unappetizing; you may ignore it). I was a bit afraid by the numerous characters in the beginning of the book, but the writing makes the story very clear, nearly effortless. I had just sometimes a tiny problem in one paragraphe or another knowing whom the pronom was referring to. A trifle.

The characters are engaging, it was comfortable to have so many good people to follow. The villain is quite your classic psychopath but I also appreciated to have some ambivalent characters, as the feminine Mages.

The author has wished to present characters belonging to some minorities (color of the skin, sexuality - particularly asexuality which isn't frequently openly represented in fiction, even if some fictionnel characters clearly are - old ladies with still - shocking!- some nerve and personality to boot) and the result is very smooth. I never had any impression of pressure, all is well blended, very naturally (with the possible exception - for me - of the healer who wanted to be refereed as "they". It may have been because the character doesn't feel any appartenance to any sexe, I'm not sure about that, but it was quite weird to my ears).

The story is quite classic, with some alternative elves and a "halfing", a short person, a bit hobbit-like. The ambiance has a clear young adult vibe for me, with a bunch of young people (the elves are old in years but still in their teens for their specie) bounding together to save the world. Ordinarily I'm not very enthusiastic with this new trend, as the characters keep very often an anormal modernity (the worst was Rebel of the Sands, which annoyed me, and also, slightly, Six of Crows and An Ember in the Ashes, which were good reads but not perfect ones for me). But it was quite discreet here, just a flavor, and my reading was easy and comfortable.

All in all a nice read, but not an unforgettable one.

Elle Maruska says

I really enjoyed this book!

It has all the elements I love in second-world fantasy: a city with various political & economic elements, all at each others' throats; a wide-ranging cast of characters; an interesting premise and not too many infodumps; and creative systems of magic.

The characters are well-drawn and distinct for the most part. Whether you love them or hate them, you definitely understand why they're acting the way they act and how they think they're doing what's best. My only exception is the main villain, Avenazar. He's left fairly one-dimensional but this is the first installment of the series so I hope we'll get some more inside info on him and why he acts the way he does. He certainly does function as a terrifying antagonist though, and in his impulse to destroy and dominate her reminds me of a certain US president who's name I won't mention...

Anyway, I enjoyed the relationships between the characters very much. I enjoyed how even to protagonists

are called out when they make mistakes, how they are forced to reckon with the consequences of their actions. The diversity of this world is incredibly well done and it's so nice to see a fantasy work where so many different facets of gender, sexuality, disability, and race are explored.

I can't wait for the next book, I'm very intrigued and excited to find out what happens next!

Ben Babcock says

Magical cities are one of my favourite tropes in fantasy novels. I think I could read nothing but magical city fiction for a while and take a long time to feel sated or bored; there is so much room for variation. Camorr from *The Lies of Locke Lamora* is an example that readily springs to mind, but this is a very old trope. As its title implies, *City of Strife* is very much a story about such a city, Isandor, essentially in the path of the ambitious and violent Myrian Empire. Claudie Arseneault skilfully weaves the lives of various characters into this political drama.

This is an ensemble cast situation, so it's difficult to know where to begin. The novel opens with a human, Arathiel, returning to Isandor after *130 years* away. Normally he would have, you know, died in that time, but he went looking for a cure for his sister's illness, and he ended up at some kind of "Well" that didn't let him age but robbed him of his tactile senses. Arathiel was a member of one of Isandor's noble Houses, but he is ambivalent about reclaiming his title and identity. He falls in with a group of philanthropic nobodies trying to run a Shelter in the lower city for Isandor's least privileged. He spends much of the novel vacillating over how much he should get involved in his nascent friendships with these people—and this decision has a huge impact on the course of the story.

Meanwhile, it what feels like an entirely different city sometimes, Lord Diel Dathirii has insulted the head of the Myrian Enclave, a nasty magician by the name of Master Avenazar. This would normally only be a minor political incident, but Avenazar is the type of person who doesn't just hold grudges—he nurtures and irrigates them like a hothouse flower. Diel may just have set Isandor teetering on the brink of war, but the other Houses don't see it that way and refuse to present the Myrians with a united, resistant front.

So there's a lot happening in this book, but at no point did I feel overwhelmed or pitched into a situation where I had no idea what was happening. At the same time, Arseneault avoids the temptation to bludgeon me to sleep or death with the cudgel of heavy-handed exposition (+1 melee, -2 charisma). She drops in enough occasional references to other geography, etc., that I get the sense there is a wider world out there, one that she has figured out at least to the extent that its politics affect Isandor. But the eponymous *City of Strife* is the story here, and Arseneault keeps the plot tightly focused on its problems.

I've been watching a lot of *The Expanse* lately, and also replaying *Mass Effect 3* in preparation for *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, so a lot of my thinking has been filtered through these two stories. Particularly in the case of *The Expanse*, the writers have done such a great job alleviating the feeling like this epic political drama is a narrative on rails: seemingly small actions by characters can have major repercussions that perhaps throw the entire story onto a new, unanticipated course. I really respect it when writers can create this kind of atmosphere in their stories, and it's something that Arseneault succeeds at here. Every character's actions flow from their own, deeply personal motivations: Larryn is hell-bent on rescuing Hasryan, damn the consequences; Diel is hell-bent on rescuing Branwen, damn the consequences; Avenazar is hell-bent on vengeance, damn the ... huh, I think I see a pattern emerging here.

In any case, it's nice to see a fantasy novel with an ensemble cast where you actually get to know the various members of the ensemble instead of seeing them reduced to usable, plot-ready archetypes. As the title might imply, too, Arseneault is not afraid to sow as much conflict as she can among the characters. Even so-called friends and allies rub each other the wrong way half the time. For example, Larryn and Cal come to loggerheads over what the former sees as a betrayal of their friendship with Hasryan when Cal gets distracted saving a stranger in need. In this case, I actually found Larryn's behaviour a little over-the-top—believable, yes, but somewhat melodramatic in its execution—but I enjoyed watching these characters screw things up. The same goes for Varden's attempts to gain Nevian's trust and the latter's bleak cynicism. There was something inside me that was just pushing back against the book and going, "This would all be so much simpler if people trusted each other! It's so obvious what they should do!" But they don't, because they are human (or elvish) and therefore flawed and, let's face it, sometimes rather daft. And as easy as it would be to write a story where everything is a straightforward and linear narrative, that isn't much fun at all.

That's the bottom line, basically: *City of Strife* is a lot of fun. For the first half of the book I was just enjoying the atmosphere; once I hit Chapter 26 or so, and everything went to hell, I literally didn't want to put the book down. I'm glad I had March Break off and didn't have to stop to, you know, work.

A final note about the portrayal of sexuality and romance in this book. Arseneault identifies as asexual and aromantic-spectrum and promotes *City of Strife* in part as boasting a diversely LGBTQIAP+ cast. If you're going into this book looking for heavy LGBTQIAP+ *plotlines* you might be disappointed, because they aren't a thing. Rather, Arseneault just telegraphs various characters' sexual and romantic orientations as and when that information comes up. There are no explicitly romantic or sexual situations in the book (which is good for any arospec people who don't like that stuff), although some of the characters meditate on the possibility of using sexual liaisons for political gain. While books that focus on characters' gender, sexual, and romantic identities are truly important, I also appreciate books like *City of Strife* that seek to normalize LGBTQIAP+ identities by *not* foregrounding those struggles. Rather, these identities are simply part of the characters, and various characters are totally fine with that (yay!) or, if they are raging bigoted monsters like Master Avenazar, predictably not so much. In which case, you know, Fireball! (That's how that works, right?)

Finally a final final note on Isandor's origin story. The use of humans, halflings, elves, and the generic medieval European-esque fantasy city setting reminded me a great deal of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and indeed, Arseneault explains in her acknowledgements that this world is based on an RPG she DMed. So ... yay me for being perceptive? This origin isn't really surprising and is, I suspect, a lot more common than authors might admit. Once upon a time I read a truly awful attempt by someone to turn their D&D campaign into a story, so it's good to see that it is possible to weave a great story out of what was probably a fun campaign.

A word of warning, though: *City of Strife* ends on a damn delectable cliffhanger, and if I had access to the second book, I would have started it *immediately* after I finished the last page of this one. This is a book I highly recommend, but if you're the type of reader who needs closure and certainty, maybe hold off on reading it until the next book is out.

My reviews of *City of Spires*:

City of Betrayal →

Maraia says

4.5 stars

Lia says

I had the opportunity to read the two first books in the Isador / City of Spires series by Claudie Arsenault. I will mostly mix my opinions of both the books, since they were both quite similar in build-up and characters and things like that. So this is a double-review! There will be no spoilers!

It took me a while to really get into the first book. This book features a lot of perspectives and for me, that was quite hard. In the first part of the book you get constantly introduced to new people and keeping up with everything was a bit of a struggle. Sadly, that also slowed down the story overall. However, after the beginning, it did pick up and a lot of things started happening. **To my tastes, it could have been a little more fast-paced but that's just a personal preference.** In the second book, I did not have that problem, because I already knew all the characters, so therefore I enjoyed the second book more from the start.

"He found reasons to grin even when there were none, in defiance of the never-ending hardships and the world beating down on him. Maybe if he smiled enough, the happiness he projected would stop being a lie and coalesce into the truth." - City of Strife

The story is about a city (duh) and the city is lead by a group of noble families. Some of the characters are part of this family and some aren't and you can get to see the situation from many eyes. There is danger and intrigue, but this story is mainly about family and friendship. **The characters form strong bonds and care so much about each other. I loved seeing them come together and especially in the second book, where almost all the characters get to know each other. In those final hundred pages of the second book, I have laughed with them and cried with them.** They were amazing.

There are a lot of characters in this book, and I could write pages and pages about all of them, so I will only focus on my favourites. **My favourites are definitely Cal and Arathiel.** Cal is aromantic and he is just very sweet and kind and caring. He loves his friends and would do anything for them. Arathiel is the outsider in the story. He is strange, mysterious, quiet but also very caring. Besides these characters there were plenty more amazing ones. Hasryan and Vellien would get a shared third place on my favourites ranking, because they deserve to be mentioned. **I could relate to so many of the characters in very different ways and I loved that they were all so different from each other.**

"Arathiel is a warm blanket: simple, reliable, soft. He's the friend you kind of forget, but when it really matters he's there. Leaping of bridges to save your neck from the noose, even though you expect nothing of him." - City of Betrayal

I cannot end this review before discussing the amazing diverse representation in these books. There were characters of almost every sexual orientation you can imagine and there were characters of different descents and different skin colors. I loved in particular, Cal's aromanticism because usually aro

characters are described as unfeeling or cold and Cal was the absolute opposite. I also really enjoyed the non-binary/enby representation (because whenever I read about one of those characters I just can't help but love them).

"You can't always choose your fights. Some battles need to be fought, whether you want to or not -- whether they can be won or not." - City of Betrayal

For the first book, my rating is 3,5 stars. But after writing this review, I am really tempted to move up my rating for the second book from 3,5 to 4 stars but I think **I'm going to just leave it in the middle: 3,75 stars! What I loved most about these two books was the representation of diverse characters and the characters in general.** The only thing that could have been improved, to my opinion, was the pacing of the first book. It took me a long time to get into the story (mainly because I struggled with the many perspectives), but after that it was great. **I would definitely recommend these books if you like political fantasy, I don't know if that is a genre but *oh well*.**

Ceillie Simkiss says

I did an early character interview with Larryn, and I loved this book exactly as much as I expected to. Y'all gotta read this. Read my full review [here](#)!

Brendon says

This is a feature book for LGBTQ+ History Month.

Disclaimer: I received a free e-book in exchange for an open and honest review.

I received an electronic copy of City of Strife by Claudie Arseneault from the author after inquiring about the book through Twitter. From the description, this book is the first in a political fantasy trilogy featuring an entire cast LGBTQIAP+ characters. Most of the fantasy I have read is not political fantasy, but more of an adventure fantasy. This entire book takes place in the city of Isandor, which is a complex society ruled by different powerful families who sit on a council. Each chapter follows a different character with their own story line in different parts of the city. Once in a while these story lines intersect, providing more context to the world and interesting plot twists.

I first need to applaud the fantastic representation through all of the characters in this book. The description of the book advertises a cast featuring all LGBTQIAP+ characters. However, you should also know there is a variety of other forms of diversity represented in the book. The cast was racially diverse and led to the a solid and very integrated dialogue on racial (skin color) relation among the different folks in Isandor ON TOP OF the relation of different [types?] of people - elves, humans, wizards. What I really appreciated was the fact that elf or wizard or other magical type of person was not considered a race, but there was racial diversity within each of these groups. I also found representation of difference in ability and socioeconomic status. All of these divergent identities were presented and vital to each character's identity; however, their identity did

not define them. A good example of this is how sexual orientation was presented. The author talks about the different romantic and platonic relationships (or lack of relationship) between different characters naturally in the writing. When it was appropriate to mention and added to the depth of a character or commentary about social justice within the world, identities were mentioned and discussed. In a fictional fantasy world, this is how I want diversity to be represented. In addition to representation of identity, this book also addresses systemic issues such as The book tackled issues like gender dynamics within "traditional" male/female gender roles, the rampant homophobia in Myrian society, racism and colorism, and the different parts of the city based on socioeconomic status.

City of Strife is book one in a trilogy. Consequently, there were a lot of chapters of meeting characters, learning about their back stories, and building the world around the city of Isandor. Authors undergo a huge challenge when building a new high fantasy world and must consider possibly hundreds of years of history, a myriad of family lines, and relationships between not only major characters but minor characters as well. And, the author must do this in a way that feels unobtrusive, slowly integrating this history and information within the flow of the story. Claudie Arseneault has the talent to do this very well, keeping the reader engaged with the active story line.

One aspect of the novel I found myself struggling with was a few pieces of the dialogue between characters. In certain instances, lines sounded out of place or unnatural when taken into context of the situation happening and the characters involved. Most of the time, these instances were due to the specific phrasing of the dialogue that seemed off to me. I am finding it hard to articulate; however, I found myself rereading passages to make sure I read the dialogue correctly. This unfortunately took me out of the the story at some points as I was trying to immerse myself in the world of Isandor. Ultimately, I found these situations to be minor in my overall experience with the book.

Overall, I am really excited for the rest of this trilogy. Author Claudie Arseneault has created a compelling world with political intrigue and deep characters. This is a book that gave me the same feeling that I get when I read huge high fantasy series. There is so much potential for every character, each with separate motivations and long term goals. At the end of the book, I finished feeling excited! There were many story lines that still needed more exploration, which made me want the second book right away! I am interested to see what happens in Isandor AND I also want to know more about different parts of the world - like where was Arathiel the whole time before this book takes place and more information about the Myriad empire. I commend Claudie Arseneault for a fantastic book one to her political fantasy trilogy. Look out for City of Strife, set to be published in early 2017!

Final Rating: 4.7/5

About the Author

Claudie Arseneault is an asexual author from Quebec City, a biochemistry nerd, lover of squids and balloons, and relentless gamer. Her first novel, *Viral Airwaves*, was published in February 2015. Since then, Claudie has edited *Wings of Renewal*, a solarpunk dragon anthology, and published several short stories. You can find out more on her website, <http://claudiearseneault.com>.

Mel says

City of Strife, the first instalment in a new fantasy series, masterfully combines a tale of city life with its politics, merchants, and assassins with the danger of an evil outer force. The story is told through different point of views from a huge cast of characters, thus giving insight into the world of both the nobles and the poor and homeless people within the city as well as the ongoings in the hostile enclave of a foreign empire that has settled outside the city Isandor.

The cast of multiple characters, fortunately, was in no way tiring or challenging, since I could connect to all of them and it was easy to tell them apart because they were all three-dimensional and distinct. The switches in point of view are not too often but also frequent enough so I didn't lose track of any of them. I think it is pretty amazing how the author managed to bring so many different characters alive on the page.

Moreover, the cast mainly consists of LGBTQIA* characters. At no point did I think that this seemed forced or over the top and the way the characters are written seemed very natural to me. There are also characters of color and a disabled character. I especially like that the latter, Arathiel, is the hero in the story when he, near the end, realises that “[t]oday, his numbed senses would be his blessing. Today he stopped hiding, stopped pretending his body worked perfectly, and just accepted it didn't.” I thought this was really lovely.

It was great in general that the focus of the book was not on the nobles, as is often the case in fantasy books, but more on the lower city where many of the disadvantaged people in life find their home in the Shelter. An additional plus is that many characters can not simply be divided in good or evil – apart from the wizard Avenazar, that is – which makes this read a more believable and also relatable one.

The first half of the book progresses a little slowly but once I hit the halfway mark I couldn't put the book down and was completely engrossed in fearing for everyone's lives. Having read *Viral Airwaves* by the author, in which not all of the characters survive, I have to say that I was really worried here for one of the character's life for some time (view spoiler) While the book develops this story arc to a kind of satisfying point, this thread and all the others are still open, some of them precariously so. The ending didn't leave me reeling or utterly frustrated but, to be honest, I don't like that I have to wait for the sequel to find out what is happening next. I asked the author today, though, and she's planning on a release for fall 2017, so that's not too long.

Concerning the content warnings of the story that I provided from the author's website, I want to both elaborate on them and to mention that I personally didn't think that this book was heavy or laden with negativity. Most of the cruelty takes place off-page and it is not bloody or very physical. The mental abuse, however, is rather prominent. Not only regarding the oppression of the people in the enclave but also regarding the torture that is unleashed on their minds. Interestingly, I didn't have much trouble with this kind of torture – probably because it is not possible in our lives – while I usually cannot stomach any physical torture in books. So if none of the content warnings from above is a trigger for you, then I think the thorough list should not sway you from reading this book.

I recommend this book if you like fantasy with a complex world building and many characters, and the diversity of this book definitely speaks in its favour.

Genre: High Fantasy

Tags: Multiple Character Cast, Lesbian Character, Gay Character, Bisexual Character, Transgender Character, Nonbinary Character, Asexual Character, Aromantic Character, Characters of Colour, Magic, Disability, Friendship/Family

Content Warnings*: Abuse (physical, emotional, mind control — seriously, if depictions of abuse trigger

you, please be very careful when approaching this novel/avoid it.), torture, homelessness, child abandonment, police brutality, racism, family death, memory loss, death by fire (mention), hanging.

*from the author's website; more information in review

Blog: Review for Just Love
