



## The Golden City

*J. Kathleen Cheney*

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**For two years, Oriana Paredes has been a spy among the social elite of the Golden City, reporting back to her people, the *sereia*, sea folk banned from the city's shores....**

When her employer and only confidante decides to elope, Oriana agrees to accompany her to Paris. But before they can depart, the two women are abducted and left to drown. Trapped beneath the waves, Oriana's heritage allows her to survive while she is forced to watch her only friend die.

Vowing vengeance, Oriana crosses paths with Duilio Ferreira—a police consultant who has been investigating the disappearance of a string of servants from the city's wealthiest homes. Duilio also has a secret: He is a seer and his gifts have led him to Oriana.

Bound by their secrets, not trusting each other completely yet having no choice but to work together, Oriana and Duilio must expose a twisted plot of magic so dark that it could cause the very fabric of history to come undone....

## The Golden City Details

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Author : J. Kathleen Cheney

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## From Reader Review The Golden City for online ebook

### Hallie says

ETA a link to this review, which points out the \*numerous\* instances of getting the Portugal setting wrong.

There wasn't a lot that I could pinpoint as "wrong" with this, but there wasn't anything at all that really grabbed me either. I didn't much care for the characters, didn't feel the setting (an alternate Portugal, in the very early 1900s) lived up to the potential it offered for unique and interesting, and the supernatural beings were just kind of -- there -- when they should have been amazing. Often they were a bit dull, even, as for example Duilio and his "gift", which he kept consulting, to the point that it seemed rather like telling the reader that he was consulting the bus/train schedule online every time he took a bus/train to DO something. I'm not sure I could really forgive him for saying, without any indication of irony, that his family had merchants to do the actual trading for them, to remove the stench of trade, and wasn't it terribly convenient that he was half selkie so found Oriana as a sireia (siren) waaaaay sexy (after proving that she wasn't human in the most invasive way) instead of monstrous.

It really didn't help that I found the font so incredibly annoying (see update). I will have to ask Hirondelle if those accents are actually Portuguese language ones - still wouldn't make any sense to use them on English words, mind. There were actual Portuguese names, which got their appropriate accents, as was only right.

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### Isa Lavinia says

I was so excited about this book! An alternate version of 1902 Portugal! Mermaids! Selkies (a bit confusing, that, Portugal isn't exactly known for its seal population... but it's fantasy!)! Spies! Romance!

It was shaping up to be one of those books I devour in less than a day!  
But it took me over a week to finish this book...

Anyone who knows anything about Portuguese history, or Portuguese society at the beginning of the 20th century, or anyone who has read anything about the mythology present in Os Lusíadas, is in for some extremely frustrating reading.

I was so confused at all the changes made to Portugal's history from the very beginning of the book - I don't mind change - this is, after all, alternate history, but it needs to be very skilfully explained, from the start, how, why, and when these changes came to pass. It is revealed throughout the book (first attempt at it around 14%) which is so frustrating I can't even begin to expound on it!  
I ended up going to the author's blog in search of an answer - which is never a good sign, if a reader has to go read the author's blog posts because the book is not making sense.

As it is, things are explained in this post by J. Kathleen Cheney.

Basically, the events in Os Lusíadas were real - except not really - the book makes a big deal about the Portuguese Sailors finding the sereias, and how they're real, ignoring the fact that they were nymphs and if

Os Lusíadas were to be taken as fact we'd have to have known about them forever, since Camões credits the Tágides (the nymphs of the river Tagus) as his inspiration.

Anyway, by the time of the Inquisition, witchery is accepted but witchcraft is forbidden. Which... was never really how the Inquisition worked, but it's fantasy, so okay. Since there are seers among the Jesuits, Dom Sebastião is warned against going into the Battle of Alcácer Quibir.

...pretty sure he was warned by just about everyone, but, being so determined to prove how ~manly~ he was (Totally not gay, you guys! Even though he was frequently found cruising the woods, and vanishing into the dunes with young attractive male company and then making up stories about how they "were hunting" which is why they were found embracing tenderly and unclothed... but I digress).

Instead, Dom Sebastião, in spite of being an incredible misogynist, and having no interest whatsoever in the ladies, and allegedly suffering from gonorrhoea, gets married like a good little king, has issue, and Portugal goes on being independent from Spain.

Not that it did us any good because we ended up splitting the kingdom into Northern and Southern Portugal later on, in an alternate take of the Liberal Wars between Dom Pedro and Dom Miguel, except with two other guys with different names. This is a bit... stupid. I mean, we're not a big country - we're what, about 92000 km<sup>2</sup>? It's like trying to divide a chewed piece of gum, let's be real.

But anyway, Southern Portugal is all about progress, and Northern Portugal, where the titular Golden City (read: Oporto) is located, is all about the church and hating mythical beings.

Also we lost all our colonies ages ago (even Nagasaki, which was only ours for like 60 years), thus erasing the whole Colonial War because I guess that's not important?

But now that the whole setting is explained we're free to be stumped by all the inaccuracies. The author, in one of her posts, mentioned how upsetting it is to see readers mention the author's mistakes in reviews, since the author is unable to correct them at that moment in time. I'm sincerely sorry if this upsets her, but this is pertinent information for other readers - any Portuguese reader is going to be completely incapable of getting into this book because the mistakes are so jarring to us. Any other reader, feel free to ignore this, I suppose, when you're not familiar with something it doesn't hinder the reading experience.

If the Portuguese reader managed to keep reading without previous historical events being promptly explained (I hope my review will allow them to, knowing from the start what happened, enjoy this book better than I did), the character's names and the way they address each other - in fact the whole way Portuguese society is portrayed, will be very frustrating.

I know the author has read Eça de Queiroz, so I'm confused as to why the characters act like British people in a Regency novel... at the risk of sounding unpatriotic (newsflash: I don't care) if you're writing about Portuguese society be it today, at the turn of the century, or even further back, you have to go deep into the small-mindedness, the pettiness, the hypocritical piety, the embarrassing attempts to seem worldly, the inability to mind one's own business. Mind you, these are bad things, but they're who we are and when written right they can be somewhat endearing (again, see Eça de Queiroz).

As it is, nothing anyone said, did, or was, ringed true.

This wasn't helped by the inaccurate naming choices.

The author mentioned in one post how Duilio, one of the main characters, was misspelled, since it should be Duílio, with an acute accent. She reasoned that since Portugal has been through quite a few Orthographic Agreements, his name could have been spelled like that. I ask: why try to come up with a justification instead

of writing it the way you know is right?  
But at least Duilio is explained...

There is a family named Pereira de Santos instead of Pereira dos Santos, Queirós instead of Queiroz (see, Melo, further ahead), Pimental instead of Pimentel. There is a Constancia instead of Constância, an Eusebio instead of Eusébio, a Tomas instead of Tomás, a Gardineiro instead of Jardineiro, and most importantly a Paolo instead of Paulo and a Melo instead of Mello.

Most importantly because of these passages from the book:

Duilio was tempted to ask which other Paolo Silva it might be, but there were probably a hundred other men in the city with a name that common.

...Or zero? Because Paolo is not a Portuguese name? It's **Paulo** Silva? I appreciate that the author, in search of common names, searched for them in facebook to see how often they popped up - but bear in mind: Brazilian people have Portuguese names too, and they don't follow the same naming conventions. So you can have a million Paolo Silvas. But they're not likely to be Portuguese born and bred.

Maria Melo, a name so commonplace that it meant nothing

This Maria Melo must be our saboteur or working with him, but there have to be a thousand women with that name in this city.

Melo, in 1902, would be very uncommon - at the time it would be Mello, it only became Melo with the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement of 1945.

Then you have unmarried women being consistently addressed by Miss "last name". Unmarried women would be addressed as Miss/Menina "first name", and female servants by first name only, unless they were a nanny or a teacher, in which case you would address them by "Nanny" or "Teacher" followed, or not, by their first name. So all of this *Miss Paredes*, instead of Oriana or Miss Oriana, just pulls the reader out of the story because you're constantly noticing how wrong it is.

As I said, these inaccuracies could be easily ignored if the reader is not familiar with Portuguese society, language, or history. But for Portuguese readers they're just gigantic stones in our path, which make getting into the story practically impossible.

Now for the story itself. Perhaps I'm not the best person to judge it, since, as I have mentioned, I just could not get into it for all the reasons above. But I suppose that, had it been set in another country, with other names, and other costumes, it would have been somewhat entertaining.

There are a few inconsistencies, such as male sereias being inferior in sereia society, but Oriana having a male superior. And it was a bit slow moving and, romantically, not resolved - probably because it'll see further development in books 2 and 3.

So, this did not work for me at all. But if, as I said, you're not familiar with anything to do with Portugal, go ahead, you might enjoy it.

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### **Amy Braun says**

A very romantic, sweeping adventure mystery set in Europe with uncommon sea-folk? Count me in! This was a really unique story with great characters, compelling magic, and a well-thought out plot. Oriana is a fantastic character who's shy for the most part, but can be very strong when she needs to be. Duilio is the kind of romantic, kind character who's a perfect match for Oriana. He's got a fun, curious streak, and is a caring gentlemen. The selling point for me was the chemistry and slow-burning romance between these two. I also appreciated the world-building and the open plot threads that will lead to other books. And thank the gods they do, because if this had been a standalone I would have rage-quit the ending. As it was, this was a sweeping romantic story that wasn't super heavy on the action and a nice change of pace. Definitely hope to see where things go from here!

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### **Eleanor With Cats says**

Loved it! I've liked J. Kathleen Cheney's fiction online, so I'm really happy she has a novel. And with a splendorific cover! This book actually distracted me from a five and a half book Seanan McGuire spree (I couldn't go back to book six until I'd finished this one) so it's definitely got some good pacing and attention-snaring powers. Heck, it even beat out the new Richard Kadrey novel, which considering the pacing and craziness in the Sandman Slim series is a pretty decent achievement.

Oriana and Duilio are some of the most appealing characters I've read paired with each other for a while. I think they work really well together in detection/intelligence. Really, I like the whole Ferreira family, not counting Paolo Silva.

I can't wait for the sequel! I look forward to more witty asides from Oriana, Duilio, and Pinheiro (in their various styles) in the future, and would love to see more of Duilio's mom and the fascinating crew under the Lady. And of course there's whatever secrets we're going to find out about Oriana's family...

Bechdel test: tons of pass

Johnson test: offscreen presumption (the Brazilian and African characters work together and don't seem to avoid each other)

Actually I'm not quite sure how to apply the Johnson test here, as I'm not sure I should look at the novel in terms of American perceptions of race, although the author is American. It seems like we consider anyone with a Spanish last name Hispanic (hence the similar etymology), and anyone Hispanic as a person of colour, so anyone from South America is automatically a PoC, unless they're a recent European immigrant, in which case you got with whatever identity they had there. Which is usually extended to Brazil, where they speak Portuguese, but I think white-looking Spaniards are usually considered white (unless you're from the 19th century), but I'm not sure whether the parallel means this applies to the Portuguese, and the Spanish and Portuguese who would (I think) have been considered white hundreds of years ago who moved over to South America (or attacked women there) became ancestors of all the Hispanic people there. So yeah, American ideas of race don't necessarily work when you try to look at them in terms of logic or internal consistency,

which is probably why we mess up so badly in race relations in the real world. So, technically, the Brazilian investigator could be white and everyone else could be characters of colour, except the reader needs to decide what human race the sereia are, or would be treated as, if they were treated in such a manner that you could tell there was a difference in how they were treated.

So, right. Makes sense...

Moving on, I like that there are a bunch of characters from all over in the book! (Although we haven't met the otter people yet.)

The sad tragedy part of reading an ARC is you have to wait over a year for the sequel.

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### **Allison says**

Maybe I was just in the perfect mood for lighter historical/urban fantasy??? because I enjoyed this quite a bit. I get how it could be slow for some people, but I was in the mood to meander a bit. I love Portuguese history but I'm not from Portugal, nor by any means am I an expert, so I was able to enjoy without being nit-picky. Just a good, fun read with some unresolved sexual tension (not going to lie, that's what made me order the second book right after finishing this one). Love that it's partially based on The Lusiads!!!

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### **Catherine Schaff-Stump says**

First of all, I have to tell you...when you get to the end of this book, insider knowledge tells me that there will be a second book. And you need to know that, because when you do get to the end of this book, it will go hard for you if you don't know that.

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But I am ahead of myself. One of the advantages of being a cuspy writer such as myself is that you get to know other writers. Eventually, those writers get published, and those excellent writers are willing to send you copies of their excellent debut novels. J. Kathleen Cheney has been nominated for a Nebula for her novella Iron Shoes. In that piece, Cheney shows her deft hand at mixing fantasy, history, and romance, and you can see the expertise that will ultimately bring The Golden City to fruition.

Here is where I seemingly deviate, but bear with me. Not as trendy or flashy as, say, zombie fiction, the latest urban fantasy monster mash, or even another high-flying, anachronistic pair in a dirigible, the sub-genre of historical fantasy has been slowly, steadily, and stealthily been growing while you weren't looking. One can gather quite a group of authors in it now: not only Clarke, but Kowal and Moyer, to name just a few. Instead of talking about this sub-genre (I know, you double-dog-dare me), I'd like to focus on Cheney's new contribution to it.

Cheney adds her sophisticated voice to historical fantasy. This book is impeccably researched. The history, fantasy, and romance of this story are well-balanced, no one thing overshadowing another. I applaud the lack

of anachronism, and the use of native fantasy elements appropriate to the setting and time, because, you know, I'm a smart reader who knows a lot about folklore and history.

The book focuses on Oriana Paredas, sereia spy, in an alternative history Portugal. She meets Dulio Ferreira, both of them intersecting on the same investigation involving political plots, death, and intrigue. But...and this pregnant pause should emphasize my point...the plot is slippery, like an eel, not predictable. Worse (better!) than the plot is the romantic tension. But...and here again, the pregnant pause...Cheney understands that the tension is the thing that keeps the reader reading. You know you want the characters to kiss, but the longer I wait to see them kiss, the better that kiss is going to be. A few obstacles to a happy culmination of the relationship never hurt a reader either.

So...the plot is unpredictable, the characters interesting and real to the time, and the relationship tension is as activated as the plot. I approve of this book on many fronts, as a reader of adventure literature (think Dumas, think Orczy), spy novels, historical romance, and historical fantasy. If you find any of those genres to suit, or, like me, many of those genres to suit, you should pick up this book.

That's *The Golden City* by J. Kathleen Cheney. Which comes out THIS TUESDAY, November 5th. Be the first on your block.

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### **Beth Cato says**

I received a copy of this book from the author. My review states my unbiased reaction.

*The Golden City* is the sort of book that would make me go, "OOOH! WANT!" It hits on several of my sweet spots: historical fiction, a unique setting (1902 Portugal), magic, and selkies. The latter is huge for me. I love selkies and am delighted when I find shorts stories and novels that utilize them well. (For those who aren't familiar with selkies, they are fairy creatures of sea who can slip off their pelt to take on human form.)

This novel alternates between two perspectives: Oriana Paredes, a sereia, who has been sent from her sea people to spy on the Golden City; and Duilio Ferreira, a police consultant with his own genetic roots in the sea. Both feel like real, complicated people. I'm normally drawn to heroines the most, but there's something especially appealing about Duilio. He's intelligent and kind, and this even comes across in a scene that could have easily turned me off of the book entirely: he intrudes on Oriana in her bath to verify that she is indeed a sereia. That could have been all sorts of creepy, but Cheney handles it with a deft hand.

The plot is fast and fun as it develops historical Portugal with a magical twist. Magic is shown through selkies, sereia, and various human gifts such as foresight, and the villains, of course, have dark powers of their own. Cheney mentions otter-folk; they didn't have a role in this book, but I love otters and I'm curious about what she'll do with them in future books. The balance in viewpoints reminded me a great deal of *Delia's Shadow* by Jaime Lee Moyer, another favorite read of this year. Both books have two narrators, a police investigator and a woman with special skills, and they work together within a historical setting to solve serial killings. I don't think this similarity is a bad thing, but I couldn't help but notice as I read and enjoyed the book.

The set-up for the ending is very well done here. I hoped the bad guy would be one person, it ended up being another, and Oriana plays a pivotal role in capturing him that I couldn't foresee at all. The last 100 pages

were so intense that it drove me bonkers when I had to set down the book for the night.

Probably the biggest negative is that there are a lot of characters to keep track of. Family houses, servants, investigators good and bad, Duilio's large family--sometimes I was a bit confused about who was who.

In all, this was a delightful read that lived up to all my hopes.

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### **Melliane says**

4.5/5

Mon avis en Français

My English review

I did not know about the novel, but after seeing the cover of the second volume on a few blogs, I was curious to discover this story. The volume is part of the ROC Fantasy collection and it's true that I wondered what it meant. Yes, because if we read carefully the synopsis, the story is more reminiscent of the urban fantasy genre than fantasy's. And finally, I think I rather put novel in this first part. But the story takes place in the 1900s and features different creatures like sereia and selkies. All this could only please me! To discover a new era, all with sea creatures? Oh yes completely for me. And I can tell you that I had a great time with this first volume and I can not wait to read more now, especially after such a purpose!

Oriana is a young sereia, a kind of creature that can be compared to sirens, spying on behalf of her superiors in Golden City. For a long time, the beings of her kind do not have the right to go to the cities or they could end up with serious reprisals. Oriana is therefore hiding her best her condition (her hands, her body ...). But while working as a companion for a girl of high society, she now considers her as a friend; they are both abducted and abandoned until they both drown. However, the skills of our young heroine allow her to escape without yet being able to save her friend. Oriana decides, against the orders she is receiving, to find the person responsible for the death of Isabel and to make him pay. Thus she will meet Duilio, a consultant for the police who is convinced she is the key of the murder investigation and that she can help him understand about the replica city that begins to appear in water. To help him and so he could help her in return, Oriana will become the companion of his mother and together they will try to understand what is really going on.

Several stories take place in the novel, and all are linked together in a surprising way. I was fascinated by all the events throughout the chapters, with this different world and the creatures that inhabit it. I always enormously appreciate to discover new species and to learn more about them and I must admit that the two types of creatures were really interesting. But in addition, we also have characters with amazing abilities and I'm very curious to know more about them.

Oriana is a heroine I loved to follow. She takes to heart her mission and really hopes to find the culprit behind all these crimes, even if it is difficult for her to manage her rebellion. She is a young woman who wants to take her destiny in hand, who will do anything to help her friends and who hopes to find someone she could trust. That's how she discovers Duilio, the man who will do anything to protect her. He is courageous, and is also trying to find the answers to his questions and always puts his family first. I took great pleasure in seeing them both together. You can feel the tension that exists between them and even though we do not really have a love story, something grows gradually to become a tangible connection. It

was very touching to see their feelings evolve and I'm curious to see what will happen thereafter for both because their love will not be easy and many obstacles face them. A story that should not exist between two persons from two people who do not like each other. But it's also what brings spice to the story and I really hope they will eventually find a solution.

Many events take place in the story and even though some points are closed here, several others are barely started, and I'm sure they will have an impact later. Whether in relation to this mysterious police or the history between our two heroes or even the Oriana's past. In any case, I can only recommend you to try this story that I loved. The author was full of ideas and her writing is a delight to read. It's a fabulous mix of sea creatures, plots and intriguing characters. A must read!

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### **Inês Montenegro says**

Writing: It is ok, nothing to say, either good or bad, about this one. It is entertaining.

Characters: Cliché and one dimensional. It would be wise to give them more consistency and development on the next volume.

Plot: Basic and short. There are way too many pages in this book for the plot it has. Perhaps a novelette would do just fine.

Worldbuilding: This was the factor which brought my attention to this book. Fantasy-Portugal and sirens? I'm in! Unfortunately, it is a disappointment. The Portugal part lacks so much research that it becomes irrelevant if it is based/ influenced by Portuguese society/ history, or if it is an entirely 'other world'. And the fantasy bit isn't so great too, since it doesn't develop its own ideas.

In a general way, I think there is potential in here, but it is still far away from reaching that potential.

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### **Kammie says**

This book was every thing I thought it would be. Loved it!

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### **Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

4 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.com/2014/07/03/b...>

**UPDATED:** Author guest post and US/CANADA GIVEAWAY (Ends July 14, 2014)  
<http://bibliosanctum.com/2014/07/07/g...>

The Golden City is a book that may take a bit of patience to get into, but it ends up being well worth the time once the story gets going. It also stands out for being one of the more unique novels I've read this year, with its one-of-a-kind setting in an alternate Portugal around the turn of the 20th century and its rousing combination of subjects like dark magic and sea folk.

The book begins with an introduction to Oriana Paredes, a spy for her people called the sereia. As a member of a race of sea folk banned from the city by the ruling king, Oriana has been posing as a maid working undercover in a wealthy aristocratic household for two years, but has befriended the family's lovely and

vivacious daughter Isabel. When Isabel decides to elope to Paris, Oriana decides to help her make her escape by disguising themselves as simple servants. But before the young women could depart, they are abducted and left to die in an underwater trap. Saved by what she is, but at the same time forced to watch Isabel drown, Oriana is set on a course to uncover the mystery of a string of similar murders and seek justice for her human friend.

Ouch. I just want to say how surprised I was at how hard I took Isabel's death. While it is revealed in the book's description, I didn't do much more than skim the back cover before I started reading and so the beginning was still quite a shock for me. But it was a good kind of surprise. In just a handful of pages, J. Kathleen Cheney has established a realistic friendship between the two girls and made me care for Isabel and the prospect of her grand romance. And in a blink, that life was taken away. It was a very effective and impactful (not to mention heartbreaking) way to start the book, and it only worked this well because the writing was so convincing. At this stage in the story, I still had only a vague sense of the bigger picture, but I understood the desire for vengeance as the driving force behind Oriana's actions. I seized upon it, looking to it as the backbone of this novel, despite all the questions still buzzing away at the back of my mind.

For believe me, there were questions aplenty. While overall I enjoyed *The Golden City*, it did take me a while to immerse myself completely into it. Books that thrust me into the middle of situation tend to have me at a disadvantage. Admittedly, I will also sometimes overwhelm myself by asking too many questions. Possibly the biggest blank for me was Oriana's role as a spy. The goals of her mission were never really clarified, and I wasn't sure what kind of information she was supposed to be bringing back to her superiors. The "City Under the Sea", which is a massive underwater art show featuring replicas of the aristocratic houses placed there by a mysterious artist, was also another source of confusion for me. A project that is so grand and ambitious even by today's standards would have plenty of buzz and investigation into it, but it seemed like much of the city took its appearance for granted.

In fact, it is the replica of Isabel's house in the City Under the Sea which should have been Oriana's water grave, if she weren't a sereia. After extracting herself from the death trap, she finds herself adrift in a city whose citizens would arrest or do worse to her if they discovered her true nature. That is until she crosses paths with Duilio Ferreira, a police consultant who has secrets of his own. Like Oriana, Duilio is looking into the disappearances of servants from wealthy households, but he is also the half human son of a Selkie (mythological creatures said to live as seals in the sea but shed their pelt to become humans on land) and is also in the midst of investigating certain crimes against his family.

Which leads me to the main reason why I'm glad I found a book like *The Golden City – Sirens! Selkies!* I am always on the lookout for good books about "sea people" that aren't rife with *The Little Mermaid* clichés or that don't simply portray creatures like sirens as malevolent seductresses. Cheney does a fantastic job providing Oriana with personality and purpose, and I love the cultural, historical and mythological details she has worked into her world.

In time, something more than a business partnership develops between Oriana and Duilio, but the romance is in no way distracting or overbearing. The romantic elements, like the mystery elements, are well blended and balanced. It won't be enough for everyone, but it was perfect for me as someone who prefers a more subtle and natural approach to romance, and the author teases the relationship between her two characters just enough for me to remain invested in seeing how their feelings for each other will be resolved.

In sum, *The Golden City* may start off slowly, but the payoff will come. Somewhere along the way, it just clicked. And most of the answers I sought were answered by the end of the book. If an alternate historical with a dash of fantasy and mystery sounds like your thing, or if you're intrigued by a story set in a unique

place starring magical sea creatures as its main players, you may want to push this up to the top of your reading list. I'm looking forward to see what will happen in the next book of this series.

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### **Jana Brown says**

This is one of those books that had phenomenal potential which was totally unrealized.

The set up is intriguing, putting us in 1902 in Portugal, which is not a set up we see often. It's history with fantastical elements including seers, some magic and sea folk including mermaids and selkies. The first chapter sets up a powerful murder mystery and from there it plods and plods and plods until I got so frustrated I skipped to the end, confirmed that it ended the way I thought it would and took it back to the library.

Beyond the plodding there are some logic holes you can drive a truck through and I had trouble really identifying with the characters. One moment they'd almost have me and I'd want to see what happened, and then they'd do something stupid or decide not to trust each other - again - and it'd be right back to annoying.

This is obviously the first in a series, and I just can't see forcing myself through more of them which is a pity.

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### **Tabitha says**

In *The Golden City* J. Kathleen Cheney paints a vivid alternate Portugal in the early 1900s. Seeing as I know nothing of Portugal's history I found the reading experience quite interesting. I completely attribute this to the fact that I wasn't caught up with historical details of places and names that I've encountered in so many other historical fiction novels. This totally allowed me to simply enjoy the feel of world, which a time period that felt familiar but unique. I loved how there was the expected treatment of women as the lesser more delicate sex in human society and yet roles for women seemed to be completely opposite when described for the sereia race, and again was different for selkies.

### **Read an article by the Author, J. Kathleen Cheney on The Things the Writer Isn't Telling You (Even When We Want To)**

Oriana is a sereia, commonly known as a siren. I know when I say siren you want to picture a mermaid - I know that is what I pictured but is definitely not the case. She is living in the city acting as a spy for her people, she has made her way into the aristocratic circles as a higher caste of servant so that whenever she happens to hear information that might effect or benefit her people she can relay this information back to them. Oddly enough while that is her occupation she doesn't spend much time in the book doing any spying because of the kidnapping and death of her employer that takes place as the start of the book. Instead she spends her time investigating the death of her friend, one of the only people who knew what she really is.

During the course of her investigating she is sought after as a witness by a seer named Duilio Ferriera who also has seafolk heritage, though he is a half selkie (seals who can shed their skin and become human) not a sereia. He has always suspected that she was not human and confronts her about it. They end up making quite the investigative team.

I have to admit that while I seriously enjoyed The Golden City, things moved very slowly. Personally, I didn't mind this because I was enjoying the world, atmosphere and build of the characters personalities. But I could definitely see the pace being an issue for other readers. I think part of what caused the slow build was because it was a mystery but with little to no action. Given that essence of a mystery novel mashed with fantasy and smidge of not quite romance thrown in, it only had the occasional bit of action thrown in to spice things up from time to time. I enjoyed it this way because the experience for me was more about the mystery and getting to know these two unique characters.

If you're into judging books by their covers, this one was a great one but possibly a bit misleading only in that I think the cover fits the trend of beautiful girls in pretty dresses that I see frequently in fantasy books that are heavier on the romance side. Cover taste is definitely a very personal thing but also genre specific. I think most avid readers can spot a book in their preferred genres by glancing at the cover. I definitely found this cover appealing because it is gorgeous, and it does represent the book well in most aspects, it was only my learned stereotype that made me categorize it before I started reading. In a way that could work both for it and against it when readers go to pick it up. Hopefully, it will just work for it. Crosses fingers because I really want to see this series published to completion. So don't be fooled, while there was definitely romantic feelings developing on either end of the main characters Oriana and Duilio, romance was not the main aspect of this book. In fact, I was very pleased that it wasn't. Instead it was simply a side plot that was done very well. Hey, a slow build for me on relationships always works. I do anticipate we will see the relationship progress much more in the coming books.

Overall, The Golden City was a very solid fantasy debut. If you enjoy water based fantasy species then this is definitely one you will want to pick up. It was such a refreshing take on sirens and selkies that I seriously look forward to learning more about this world and I can't wait to see more of Oriana and Duilio!

#### **Guest Posts from the author J. Kathleen Cheney**

J. Kathleen Cheney discusses Selkies, Sereia (Sirens) and Mating – oh baby

The Things the Writer Isn't Telling You (Even When We Want To)

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#### **Khanh, first of her name, mother of bunnies says**

This book is tagged with the "fantasy" genre, but while there are elements of magic and mythological creatures within it, **this barely qualifies as a fantasy book**. It is set in an alternate version of Portugal, and while well-described enough, the setting is just there, there is nothing about the place that blends into the story or adds anything special to it. **It is nothing more than a turn-of-the-century, plodding investigative mystery, where the characters just happen to be sea creatures, selkies and sereia (sirens).**

There is nothing that I outrightly hate about this book. **You will notice I have no quotes of this book in this review; that is because there is nothing in this book that is worth quoting, for better or worse.** The characters are fine, the world building is lacking somewhat, the mythology has inconsistencies, but it didn't really bother me that much because this book suffers from a glaring problem of having **a really, really boring plot and a completely underwhelming mystery with no intrigue and no danger whatsoever.**

Summary: Oriana Parestes is a sereia (a siren) who lives as a maid servant to Lady Isabel in The Golden City, a fictional city in an alternate version of Portugal. It is September 1902, and they are running away from

home so that Isabel can elope with her lover. Barely out of their house, the two are abducted, and they wake to find themselves in a miniature underground version of Isabel's mansion, tied and trapped in an underwater artwork installment known as *The City Under the Sea*. Thanks to her heritage as a sireia, Oriana manages to escape, but Isabel is not so lucky. After her escape, Oriana is found and taken under the care of a wealthy society young man named Duilio Ferreira who dabbles as a police consultant. He is part sea creature himself, and together, the two set out to investigate the mystery of her disappearance, of his mother's missing pelt, of some kind of mysterious conspiracy against the king. And there's some vague stuff about spying.

**The plot:** So extremely dull. Don't get me wrong, I love a good mystery. Mysteries are my bread-and-butter of reading. I absolutely adore mysteries, but it has got to be well-written, it has got to be compelling, it has to have enough mystery and intrigue and danger, combined with excellent characterization to get me hooked. This book does no credit to the investigative genre. It is the worst kind of historical detective novel in that the investigative style is pure footwork, dull, boring, where the detectives themselves are so lacking in personality that there is nothing to keep me interested.

The book is so light on fantasy. The characters are sea creatures, with some minor powers; Duilio himself has the power of foresight if he happens to ask the right kinds of questions. Duilio's gift is in foretelling, and he has to ask himself questions in a certain way to get the right answers out of the voices in his head. I really would not call this book a fantasy at all, it is more of a mystery with some light fantasy elements that doesn't add anything to this book. **It certainly does not make this book wondrous, magical, in any way whatsoever.**

The book plods on as Duilio hires investigators, work with the police force, talk to servants and townspeople to get clues. Oriana goes to society parties to find more clues. It may be appropriately investigative, but it is just. So. BORING. There's something about necromancy, about dead servants being killed, but it is made so light as to seem everyday. It's like "Oh, I'm having a croissant this morning. The weather is particularly good, don't you think? It's been so rainy late, I'll be glad to see some sun. Oh, and there's someone maybe using necromancy magic to make the buildings in *The City Under the Sea* float underwater. Do you want to go for a walk today?"

**THERE IS JUST NO DANGER. NO EXCITEMENT.** It completely kills the element of mystery. I do not have a problem with historical mysteries. I know investigative methods of the past are old fashioned, slow, often without results. There is a way of making characters stand out, of following clues and making small details and everyday detection intriguing, compelling. **This book completely fails in that regard.**

Oriana is supposed to be a spy. I see no evidence of it. I see Oriana being worried somewhat about her father. I see her arguing with her spymaster, who is about as useful as boobs on a man. Oriana is supposed to have a *destiny* among her people, a gift for *calling*, which leads to her becoming a spy in the first place. The problem is simply that Oriana never, ever, ever acts as a spy. It is a title. Much like "Vice President." Sure, it seems pretty cool, but it's just for show only; **everyone knows Vice Presidents are useless, much like Oriana's role as a spy.**

Truly, this is the most boring mystery I have read this year.

**The setting:** **Full of inconsistencies, plot holes, and while well-explained, without a true sense of place.** The setting is in an alternate version of Portugal; the year is 1902. It may be Portugal, and it may be pretty well described, but the setting is largely irrelevant, and we are pretty much told "this is how things are" and told to accept them without much explanation. There is really no sense or reason for the setting. The book might as well have been set in Indonesia, Toronto, Chicago. The setting just doesn't really matter, however

well the Golden City is described. The Golden City is a city within Portugal, ruled by a Prince Fabricio. Here is where things get fuzzy. We know that there's sirens, and otterfolk, and selkies. It took awhile for me to understand that people in Portugal actually know of their existence, and it took awhile for the Sireia's past to be brought up. There's some light magical elements, and we know of otherworldly creatures, yet the people of this world seem strangely resistant to the idea of magic and often outrightly deny what's in front of their eyes altogether, while having laws adamantly against it.

There are just a lot of holes in this world, in its people, in their beliefs, in society. For example, sireia, selkies, otterfolks are banned on land. People are supposed to be suspicious and out to look for spies from the sea people, yet it is so easy for Oriana to blend in, and instead of suspecting that she's a spy (since there should be an atmosphere of a witch hunt), people too easily buy into the idea that Oriana just as psoriasis, since she's constantly covered from head to toe, instead of looking at the obvious "SHE'S A SEA CREATURE WHO HAS TO COVER HER FINS."

This is where the book disappointed me further. While her people's clothing, their history, is somewhat described, their society is left so incredibly vague. Oriana's people are supposedly matriarchal, and Oriana's father is in exile because he dared to challenge the fact that his gender is not inferior, yet Oriana is under the almost absolute control of a male head spymaster, and seems to be unable to challenge this. The mythology of the sireia, their culture, their society, is so incredibly vague. **While it would not have contributed to the storyline, I would have loved to know more about her people, because at least I would have felt like there is more to Oriana that is worth knowing.**

The characters: This book is narrated by two alternating characters, Oriana and Duilio. Both stories are told from a third-person narrative, and both characters are equally forgettable. Oriana is not stupid, she is simply without personality; as I said, she is spy in name only, a character on paper only. Oriana is not stupid, she is pretty smart sometimes, she never acts in a way that makes me want to bash her on the head for her idiocy, but she is altogether inconsistent in her characters sometimes, and **I never, ever feel any sort of emotion from her or for her, even when Oriana witnesses her close friend's death and survives that attempt at murder herself.**

Yes, she's sad about Isabel's death, but I never felt her sadness. It is just words written on paper, I never felt the overwhelming grief, the sense of injustice, the outrage that comes with wanting vengeance. Oriana's emotions just seem, for lack of a better word, false. You want a good demonstration of grief? Look at Mackayla Lane from the *Fever* series. **Oriana's supposed grief is but a washed out pretense of it.**

Duilio is a gentleman, but he is a contrary gentleman. I don't know what to think of him. **Here is a guy who thinks nothing of bursting into Oriana's bath while she is naked to prove beyond a doubt that she is, in fact, a sireia, while thinking he's too chivalrous to take her to bed or to keep her as a mistress.** He is, again, boring, and I can't help but feel that his and Oriana's love story is less of a love story than further proof that birds of a (boring) feather sticks together. Their courtship largely consists of shared glances while traipsing around town investigating stuff. **Their romance burns as hot as a spluttering matchstick-sized birthday candle.**

Skip this book unless you have a high tolerance for boredom. There is no fantasy here. The only mystery is how I managed to read this book without falling asleep.

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## VMom says

4.5 stars. I got this as a free book from Goodreads giveaways. I wasn't sure what to expect, having never read any of Cheney's work before.

This is a alternate-history mystery fantasy set in 1905 Portugal which has been split into two principalities. The main character, Oriana Paredes, is a siren passing as a human in the The Golden City, which is closed to sirens because the ruling Prince believes in a prophecy that he would one day be killed by one. She is a low-level spy gathering any information that comes her way as a paid companion to a socialite debutante. The story opens with her helping her employer elope when they are abducted, which plunges Oriana into the middle of a mysterious conspiracy involving magic and politics.

The worldbuilding in this book is original and well-crafted. The story centers around the mystery, which is paced to keep you turning the pages. I was slow to warm to Oriana as a character, but her male counterpart Duilo very likable. There is a slow-burn romance subplot between the two, which I assume is set to continue in the sequel(s).

I enjoyed reading this, am really intrigued by the setting and supporting characters, and will definitely be looking for the next book.

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