



The Sterkarm Handshake

Susan Price

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"Beware of shaking hands with a Sterkarm!" goes the folk saying. Why the warning? The members of this wild 16th-century Scottish clan are left-handed, and while they smile and offer the right hand, the left wields a dagger.

When a 21st-century mega-corporation opens a Time Tube to the 16th century, the stiff-backed CEO finds his plans for exploiting the mineral and tourism possibilities of the ancient English-Scottish border frustrated by the Sterkarms--raiding parties of men he regards as primitive animals.

On the other side of the Time Tube, anthropologist Andrea Mitchell has been sent to live with the Sterkarms to be the corporation's informant and translator. There she is surprised to find herself admired for her generous curves and accepted warmly by the volatile and affectionate--but intermittently murderous--clansmen. When her lover, Per, is grievously wounded on a raid, she persuades Old Toorkild, the chief, to allow his handsome and adored son to be transported to the 21st century for healing. But when Per awakes in a world four centuries ahead of his own, his terror and suspicions of treachery bring down a wild collision between heartless technology and a ferocious people skilled in passionate defense of their life and lands.

Winner of the Guardian Fiction Prize in England, Susan Price's *The Sterkarm Handshake*--a richly textured love story, a vivid and sometimes humorous portrayal of confrontation between cultures, and a thumping good page-turner--should find enthusiastic fans among teen-fantasy and time-travel buffs. (Ages 12 and older) --*Patty Campbell*

The Sterkarm Handshake Details

Date : Published October 17th 2003 by Point (first published January 1st 1998)

ISBN : 9780439978965

Author : Susan Price

Format : Paperback 455 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction, Time Travel, Young Adult, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review The Sterkarm Handshake for online ebook

CLM says

Andrea Mitchell, a somewhat plain and friendless anthropologist for a slightly futuristic British corporation, is forced to join an expedition to the 16th century so that she can assist in exporting mineral resources. What her employer does not expect is that she soon prefers the natives to her own co-workers...

I realize now this would be good to read in conjunction with The Sparrow. Four and a half stars.

Isobel Robertson says

I've had this book since I was a teenager, and I find myself telling people about it over and over again. I recently returned to read it for the first time in years, and I think I enjoyed it even more than the first time.

This novel is based on a brilliant concept that blurs futuristic sci-fi and historical fiction. It looks at issues like colonialism, cultural superiority, romanticization of history, and exploitation of natural resources. Alongside all of this, it's a good, gripping story. None of the characters particularly stood out to me, but they worked perfectly well as a way to express the overriding themes of the story.

What I especially love about this book is the incredible historical detail. Having an anthropologist as a time-traveler adds believable richness and depth to the descriptions- it is Andrea's job to notice every little thing that contemporaries would take for granted. As a postgraduate history student myself, it is this sort of detail which fascinates me the most (so much that I wrote a blog post about the setting of The Sterkarm Handshake).

All in all, this is a must read for anyone who loves historical fiction. It could be a great action story for teenagers, or a more meaningful read for adults.

Deborah says

I told a friend I'd just read a really good book set in the Scottish Borders in the 16th century, and she asked "Is it a fantasy novel?". "Oh no," I replied. "It's realism. Apart from the time travel."

Jackie "the Librarian" says

Imaginative time travel adventure. Corporate paid researchers go back to the 16th century to exploit the resources, only to find they are no match for the so-called primitive people they try to take advantage of, the Sterkarm clan. Which group is more civilized? More treacherous? It is up for debate.

Researcher Andrea prefers the Sterkarms, and one of them, Per, prefers her.

Why are Scots always portrayed as being so lusty? Maybe it's in contrast with the English.

Annie says

This would have been four stars, but it was just too long and repetitive. The same situations were repeated again and again, but the writing was interesting enough to keep reading. However, if the story had been better edited/shorter, I think it would have been miles better.

The characters were interesting, I LOVED the violence, which I've heard was controversial for a lot people given this was technically a children's book, but I'm pretty sure I read this as a kid and I'm no worse for it ;)

The only annoying thing about the story is Andrea! Never have I met a more naive, indecisive or ridiculous person in my life. Half of the people who died or got hurt, died and got hurt because of her ill-thought plans to STOP THEM BEING HURT! She had zero understanding of people's motives, desires and life styles - for some reason she has it in her head that people who live hard lives and have to scrap to clothes and feed their families shouldn't kill/hurt other people. As if that's the reality of our history.

Idiot.

JL says

3.5

Riana says

Andrea Mitchell works for FUP, a 21st century company who has developed a time-travel tube back to the 16th century. As a researcher, she lives among the Sterkarms, a border clan known for their bravado and treachery. In this 16th century England countryside she falls in love with the clan head's son and when FUP starts negotiating about "trading" with the Sterkarms things start going terribly wrong.

The Sterkarm Handshake has a bit of a slow start, but once the action kicks in, it does so in plenty. The writing is detailed, backed by realism and good research.

There is an unusual lack of good-guys bad-guys theme (which makes the tale all the more sincere) and no lack of violence. A touching and tragic romance runs through the story without the expected happy ending. Historically very intriguing and overall an excellent read!

Kirsten says

Kind of an Outlander-esque set-up, but it goes in very different directions from there. Lots of fun, cool interesting ideas, some fun language play and playing with changing perspectives.

Donna says

Modern day people have created a time tube, intending to mine the oil, etc. of 16th century Scotland and are surprised at how canny the Sterkarm clan are.

I really wanted to like this book more. The main character, Andrea, is living with the Sterkarms to interpret and she falls in love with Per (son of the head of the clan). The book does an excellent job of making you feel like you're in the 16th century - smells, sounds, food, songs/narrations, etc. - but it drags on way too much. If around 150 pages were cut out, it would be much improved. It takes pages for someone to walk up a flight of stairs, look around a corner, change direction, and move back. It's flabby. I didn't really buy into the 'romance' between Andrea and Per either; it felt like an infatuation. I will not be continuing on in the series. If you like 'Outlander', you should give this one a try.

Masha Toit says

This book started really well and then, about two thirds in, went rapidly downhill.

The premise, of showing how 21st century people saw the 16th century, and vice versa, was really well done. I found many of the questions raised really interesting. Particularly the different kinds of violence. Twenty first century Andrea found it hard to parse the way in which violence was part of everyday 16th century life, and hard to know how to judge her 16th century friends. Are they "good people" or are they violent and vindictive liars? Or maybe both? And Twenty first century boss guy (can't remember his name now) is perfectly fine with planning genocide, as long as it's at arms distance.

The writing is vivid and the action sequences gripping, especially because you knew that nobody was safe.

But something happened about two thirds through. It became clear to me that the story would not have a satisfying ending (I don't care that it wouldn't have a happy ending, that's a different thing) and I was right. The characters started behaving in repetitive ways - especially Andrea, who started out as a confident woman and becomes whining, indecisive, silly, and strangely ineffectual. She did some brave things, but I found myself cringing at the amount of time she spent running after male characters shouting "please don't hurt him". Actually, thinking about it now, this book could definitely do with a few more female main characters. Per's mother Isobel was the only other woman that really had much of a role, and she didn't really feature much.

I also dislike the fact that I could tell way ahead of time that (view spoiler)

Diana Sandberg says

Why on earth is this book not a film? It would be a corker.

I read this many years ago, came across it again recently and decided to re-read, remembering only the vague outlines of the story and that I had quite liked it. I liked it even better this time.

I tend to avoid time-travel stories, because, generally, the author feels obliged to explain how it works, and the explanations are inevitably ridiculous. One of the things that won me over to this story early on was that, as none of the protagonists is a scientist, none of them has the vaguest clue how it works. Fine. I can work with that. The culture clash between the 21st century and the 16th is very well presented; it is mind- and heart-wrenching, almost beyond bearing, to characters on both sides.

In common with some other reviewers, I am puzzled that this is/was apparently marketed as a children's book. I would still be puzzled if it were YA. Can the notion that it is for kids derive entirely from the fact there are no explicit sex scenes? Bizarre.

Anyhow, I am pleased to learn there are 2 more books following this one. (view spoiler)

Vee says

I really really enjoyed this when I was at school. I don't remember much of the story now (school was some time ago haha) but at the time I remember it affected me - I just thought it was so inventive and imaginative because I hadn't read anything quite like it before. A real dissection of human nature and greed - with a bit of sci-fi and romance thrown in. Good stuff.

I wish it was available on Kindle now :(

Monica Edinger says

I liked this book tremendously when I read it a few years ago. Someone else mentioning The Gideon Trilogy made me think of it. This takes place in Britain too, but at a very different point in time. This is quite YA, but I recommend it for those interested in a fresh and different sci-fi/time travel melange.

Hayley says

Mixed feelings about this book. Loved the concept of it and thought it was a fast paced and interesting story. Strangely, the element that annoyed me the most was also the thing that made the book more realistic (if you can say that for a book concerned with time travel?). I found it confusing that I never knew which side I was meant to be rooting for. Characters on both sides acted in deplorable ways which does make for a more interesting story but also meant that there were few characters that I actually liked.

Ron says

“To them, to kill in revenge was a duty; to forgive the killing of a kinsman sin.”

Excellent science-historical fiction mashup. Avoids the time travel paradox by having travelers visit a past in a world a few dimensions away from our earth, but recognizably similar.

“... always worrying about someone getting hurt, as if people could keep from getting hurt.”

Changes point of view often--paragraph by paragraph--but with sufficient clues to keep the reader oriented. Deep into the minds and emotions of all the principle characters (who vary enough to reflect vastly different mores and experiences), to the point that we understand the motivation and worldview of those we might normally consider villains. Female lead has near-terminal conscience and indecision problems, which makes her the perfect lens into the story.

“Lovers divided by family and feud made good stories, but in life it was nothing but misery.”

Excellent immersion into medieval culture: not just sights and sounds, but smells and taste And all that filth. Music and folk tales deepen our cultural engagement. A skilled archer misses; hooray!

“It was like the music stopped and I had no chair.”

Quibble: Land Rovers haven't had hub caps for decades.

If I had but a swan's wings
Far over hills and sea I'd fly--
To my true love's arms I'd fall at last
And in her arms I'd gladly die.

Morgan F says

From the blurb of the cover, I thought this would be a great, interesting book, but the way it was written was very slow. I could barely get into it. I only finished it to get it over with, not because I was actually enjoying it. I just never get engaged in the story, even though most of it is pretty much non-stop action. I also didn't see it as a young adult novel. It just felt like more of a adult novel to me. Its not that teens can't handle it, its just the tone.

Howard says

A prize-winning YA novel that combines convincing historical detail, smart, engaging storytelling, and a simple science-fictional premise to produce an exciting, highly readable and morally complex tale. Andrea, an English anthropologist of the near future, has been hired by FUP, a powerful international corporation, to study and live among the residents of the lawless 16th century borderlands between England and Scotland. Having established a time-tube between the periods, FUP intends to exploit the natural resources of the past, and Bryce, the executive in charge, expects Andrea to provide him information to help him manipulate the locally powerful Sterkarm family. Far heftier than is fashionable in the 21st century, Andrea is the height of beauty in the 16th, and becomes the lover and intended bride of Per, son of Toorkild, the leader of the Sterkarms. While charmed by the warmth, wit and loyalty of the Sterkarms, Andrea is appalled by the brutality and squalor of a life without medicine, plagued by disease and constant deadly battles. When Bryce (a cartoonishly evil bad guy among otherwise multifaceted portraits; he even taunts Andrea about her weight), who interprets the Sterkarms lack of modern polish as stupidity, decides to ignore Andrea's council and use force and deception to control them, Andrea finds herself torn between her feelings about her

adopted people and loyalties to her own time. Along with romance, adventure, and the wonderfully rendered picture of life in the 16th century--you can smell and hear it as well as see it--adults and more sophisticated teens will appreciate the ambiguities of cultural values in conflict.

Hannah Bnana says

This was a gripping yarn! I have no fingernails left after reading this book. It reminded me of Diana Wynne Jones' multi-dimensional story, *Hexwood*. It had a lot in common with the *Owl Service*, by Alan Garner. In this story a 21st C company sets up a time tunnel to go back to the 16th century. Their purposes are to exploit the vicious tribal people they find there, living on the border between Scotland and England. An anthropologist is sent back to live with the Sterkarms and to find out more about them. Trouble is, she falls in love with the beautiful Per, son of the head of the clan. If he was around today, he'd be a metrosexual. I thoroughly enjoyed this time-travelling yarn. It was full of suspense and danger. The 21st century entrepreneurs underestimated the Sterkarms, who may not have the technology but are wise enough to stick up for themselves. There is also the added romantic element of Andrea and Per, who make a lovely couple. The 16th C was described so vividly I could almost smell it as I read the book. One thing puzzled me was the book's categorisation as a kids book. There are no kids in it. It is scary. There are sexual elements to it. I think it is a book for young adults, or for older readers. I am about to start the sequel, *A Sterkarm Kiss*. Highly recommended.

Quirkyreader says

I give this Science Fiction/Fantasy story four stars. I thought the story could have been a bit more developed in areas. I also know that there are two more parts to this story.

"Outlander" fans might enjoy this story. And if so it can be used as a stepping stone for younger readers to get into the series.

It was a fast paced read and worth a try.

Lara says

I really enjoyed this. It reminded me of Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book* in its evocation of the past as an absolutely alien country. The Sterkarms may live on the 16th-century English/Scots border, but they speak quasi-English at best. Their morality is blue-and-orange, and centered solely around what's best for the Sterkarms. They have no interest in parlay or treaties or trade agreements, and if the Elves (the 21st-century time-travelers) prove to be unfaithful or a threat, the Sterkarms are going to *demolish* them. And after being privy to the 21sters' condescending behavior towards the Sterkarms, and knowing their stated plans to plunder the 16th-century's resources while "re-homing" the people and turning Sterkarm lands into themed vacation spots for the wealthy, I am *absolutely* on the side of the Sterkarms. Come who dares meddle with me, indeed.
