



Tam Lin

Pamela Dean, Terri Windling (Introduction)

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In the ancient Scottish ballad *Tam Lin*, headstrong Janet defies Tam Lin to walk in her own land of Carterhaugh . . . and then must battle the Queen of Faery for possession of her lover's body and soul.

In *this* version of *Tam Lin* Janet is a college student, "Carterhaugh" is Carter Hall at the university where her father teaches, and Tam Lin is a boy named Thomas Lane. The book is set against the backdrop of the early 1970s.

Tam Lin Details

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From Reader Review Tam Lin for online ebook

C. says

The very worst thing about this book was the horrifyingly clunky prose, and the author's need to describe everything in exhaustive detail in the most boring way imaginable, like a fourteen-year-old's daily entries in her diary (I kept a diary a lot like this at fourteen - I think it might have been better written). I mean, almost *the entire first half* of the book described the first term of the first year of the protagonist's college degree. I was so close to giving up at that half-way point. I'm pretty sure I only continued out of hatred, or at the very least spite.

Yeah, so a large part of the reason I didn't like it is because I really have no interest in hearing about the minutiae of life at some liberal arts college in the midwest. I guess I can see how it could be nice for some people to remind them of their college experience (though I can't see how *anyone* could enjoy this prose), but I'm still in that college experience, and all it does is remind me of the worst things about it. The claustrophobia, the cliquey-ness, the incredibly boring rounds of dates. At least my university is in the middle of a bustling metropolis rather than the middle of nowhere. But I'm nowhere near being able to romanticise anything yet, and may never be able to. Secret: I'm kind of antisocial - more like Danny Chin than Janet, anyway.

I liked the second half of the book much better than the first, because the pace sped up. Though we could still keep up to date with the important events in Janet's life! Such as which subjects she was studying in which terms, and what she thought of them, mainly by reading sweeping and unsubtle statements that once again reminded me of nothing so much as a teenager's diary, when they've got bored or busy and can only be bothered updating once a month. "This term I have English with Mr Dunne. We studied Tim Winton's short stories, I didn't like them at first, but in the end I did." Any writer who is actually good should be able to incorporate this information in the text without having to state it outright.

In fairness, though, I should state that this book really really really made me want to study classical Greek. But this is not by any means the origin of this desire (reading actual Greek texts was that), it just reminded me of it. I also think it's fair to state that Dean really overuses the semi-colon and that was pretty annoying.

The last third of the book, however, was actually almost good, and I read the last chapter fast (it wasn't quite un-putdownable, but I didn't want to put it down, either). Probably this was because she finally started doing some bulk fantasy work, which was really what I was there for. I was disappointed, though, when I read the ballad reprinted at the end (I hadn't read it before), at how literally she interpreted it. It was just Tam Lin, transplanted directly to a midwestern liberal arts college. And I think Pamela Dean was there to write a book about the experience of studying at a midwestern liberal arts college, not to write a serious and interesting retelling of an incredibly powerful fairy tale (of the old sort, sans gossamer wings and little tutus). And frankly, that was disappointing.

I borrowed this from the library on impulse because someone mentioned it on a thread about the Best Book Evah, *Fire and Hemlock* (I thought it was Mariel but turns out it was someone I don't know). I hate it so far. I hate the way it's written and it's one of those infinitely annoying American books set in liberal arts colleges that seems to be set in a parallel universe very similar to our own, but where nothing quite makes sense. Even the language they use is different, and slightly perplexing. Like all that crap about propping up

bookshelves with books?? And all the weird private jokes that seemed to be inserted in there, designed to be entirely comprehensible to everyone except me? And seriously, what's the deal with Peg? She's a sophomore, right? Sophomore means second year, right? (see, I've been carefully studying my vocabulary.) So why would a second year girl be so enthusiastic about making friends with first years? (sorry, I mean *freshmen* [If I was speaking out loud right now I would have leant heavily and scornfully on that word.].) IT MAKES NO FUCKING SENSE, but nothing about college life does, really, even in real life, which is why I moved out of the damn place, narrowly escaping insanity.

Anu says

If you can get over the fact that this is some sort of retrospective paean to Carleton College and the author peggy sue's (whatever that phrase is) herself on to the protagonist, you'll enjoy the book. It's somewhat irritating in that everyone in the book is incredibly boring (and the book largely seems to be about how people in college get into really boring sexual relationships but they're having SEX, so apparently it's super adult and interesting) but then after 8000 pages, all the relevant action takes place on pages 8001-8011 and then you spend a couple of hours flipping back through the whole book to see how the puzzle fits together. And then you never read it again.

Tam Lin is basically a modern re-telling of the Legend of Tam Lin. The characters are one dimensional, Janet is REALLY annoying and everyone is incredibly pretentious. I mean, I have an arts underground background myself and I don't know a SINGLE person who spouted poetry at me. Every last one person is some version of Elfine from Cold Comfort Farm...except I don't think Pamela Dean was trying to paint a funny caricature. They don't love one another, convey any sense of passion-nothing. It's hard to explain-I found the plot fascinating (in the sense that the creepy, foreboding nature of faerie is pretty well developed) but I didn't really like a single character. I thought they all acted like cardboard cutouts.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

This is one of those books that some people love and others can't stand. I happen to love it, but ... it's different, mostly a fairly straightforward story of a girl's college days, with just a few glimpses of magic around the edges. You'd be well advised to check out some of the reviews of this book to see if it's likely to be your cup of tea.

This is a modern-day retelling of the old ballad of "Tam Lin." Here's one version of the old tale of the pregnant girl who tries to save her love from the Queen of Faerie. I suggest reading it before you read *Tam Lin*, to help you catch the many subtle clues and hints that tie this novel to the original ballad.

This version of the story follows Janet's life and times at a small liberal arts college, beginning as a freshman and going up to Halloween of her senior year, and her many interactions with her roommates and friends. There is a fantasy element to this story, but the magic creeps up extremely slowly until it burst into full bloom at the very end of the book -- and I do mean the *very* end.

If you're expecting a novel where magic and fantasy fill the entire story, or if you have little patience with

reading about theatre and the arts and the college students who live and breathe them, this version of *Tam Lin* is not for you.

However, if you don't mind a book where the fantasy element is **much** more subtle and is woven into a story about college life and liberal arts majors who put their hearts into plays and walk around randomly quoting Shakespeare and the like to each other, there's magic, along with a lot of wit and humor, to be found in Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin*.

Content advisory: Nothing explicit, but several of the characters sleep with each other as college students typically would.

Paxnirvana says

homigawds... This book is a lot of work. I don't mind a lot of work reading, sometimes, but cripes, I honestly don't care what classes she takes each quarter. If it moved the plot, I might, but it doesn't. No. It doesn't.

All the action(!) -- what little there is here, and by "action" I mean "plot" -- happens in the last 150 pages... which I've just reached.

Why did I pick this up again? Oh yeah... recs. *headdesks*

Update:

DONE. Finally. *sighs deeply*

Unfullfilling ending. Just. Ends. Gods. After slogging through all that "what class to take, what author to quote" pretentious shit I get 3 pages of shapeshifting and a disapproving stare from the villian. And no resolution to the personal shit.

Can I have the time I spent reading this back plzkthnxbai?!

Amanda says

I've read 200+ pages and I'm throwing in the towel. So far, all that's happened is the main character, Janet, has gone to class. Romantic poets and playwrights have been discussed, bunk beds have been dismantled, a bust of Schiller has been stolen, bowls of tapioca have been eaten, the merits of various college professors have been weighed, and everyone--EVERYONE--goes around spouting random bits of poetry and prose. After perusing a few other reviews, I feel confident that it's not going to get any better and the whole fairytale thing is tacked on at the end. I wanted fantasy and instead I got a novel as riveting as reading a college course catalog.

Raya says

Instinct was telling me to stop at page 100. I should have listened, because this was a strange, strange book,

the kind that makes you scratch your head and say “err...uhh...huh?” However, I was compelled to finish it, only because I wanted to find out how the story ended. Plot-wise, the story was actually pretty interesting, but the storytelling was inconsistent and erratic. She expends so much detail on what classes Janet is taking and what everyone is majoring in....did the reader really have to sit through all of Janet’s advisor visits? She might as well write about what the students ate for breakfast. Oh wait, she did. There were so many more interesting plot points she could have developed, like the ghost stories, Professor Medeous, even her relationship with Thomas. The majority of the novel focused on mundane college life. And then, all of a sudden, she throws in these fantastic, fairy-tale-esque elements in the last 50 pages of the book that were supposed to tie the novel together, but only made the novel feel even more disjointed. Not one I’d recommend.

El says

Sing it, Sandy.

So, for those of you not in the know, Tam Lin is a Scottish ballad about the liberation of Tam Lin from his love and capture, the Queen of the Fairies. Oh, those pesky fairies again. Always getting involved in shit they shouldn’t.

Pamela Dean writes a contemporary version of that story. Reading it is kind of exhausting.

Janet is a freshman at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Hey, I went to one of those too! Except I attended one in Missouri instead of Minnesota. There are a lot of similarities - the description of the campus, descriptions of campus life (says the woman who never actually lived on campus, but hung around enough to get an idea), and so much more. Our campus had a ghost story too.

But reading this book was sort of like being in school again. The first 300-some pages are about Janet’s first year, while the rest of the book rushes by in the few remaining pages. This is sort of sloppy writing, but at the same time, isn’t that sort of how college went for a bunch of us? It’s like that first year took *for.ever* and then it was the second year and we were pros, and it all just flew by like that. Okay, maybe not.

There’s a *lot* of talk about courses and majors and professors and little inside jokes about each. Again, not unlike college life. Except when you’re living it, you’re also going for a refreshing drink or taking a nap, and while you’re reading this book it’s just being hammered and hammered into your brain. Where was the fantasy? Where were the fucking fairies? I waited a really long time.

And so will you! The real magic doesn’t happen until very late into the story, and you’ll probably wonder if you missed it. It’s there, so hang in there, but you’ll probably want to throw in the towel way before you find it. Before you get there, you will know more about these undeveloped, 2D characters and their problems more than your own, and you will be so tired of hearing about birth control and sex and the Classics. It’s a clunky story and so very little happens in such a large amount of space; honestly, I can’t believe I read it all.

This is a 1-star read for me, except I’m feeling gracious and I can’t say the book is entirely without merit. I thought of my own college days and wish I had done some of them differently, but then I’m also reminded of how insanely expensive it was, the 2-3 jobs I held in order to pay for it, the drama between friends that erupted occasionally, the politics of the college under a disgusting pig of a president. The college years are often sort of shallow, but I met my best friend there and we’re still besties, and that says something. Because

I get sick of people pretty easily (and they get sick of me too). So this book reminded me of some of that good stuff too.

I'm so glad to be done. Hanging in there was much like hanging in there when I went to school. For a long while I couldn't even imagine the end, and then all of a sudden the end was there. Voila.

Our ghost story was better.

First Second Books says

I reread Pamela Dean's wonderful *TAM LIN* this weekend while traveling to my cousin's high school graduation party, because while this book is a fairy tale, it's also a book about how college life works (a land equally strange to me as fairyland was when I first read this book in high school).

This book is so good. It's phenomenal as an ethnography of the mysterious and fantastical land of college, with discovering first love and also learning new things -- and it's also a great reading list (and full of Shakespeare).

Trin says

Mixed feelings, once again! On the plus side, I absolutely could not put this book down. Dean makes the setting—a midwestern liberal arts college in the early '70s—come alive so completely that even when the biggest issue at stake is what classes Janet, our heroine, is going to take, I was utterly entranced. In fact, the straightforward college narrative is so convincing and so good that I would have been perfectly happy for the book to be about nothing but that. Which is not to say that I didn't like the undercurrent of weird supernatural goings-on—on the contrary, I LOVE that kind of thing. I love hints that something's not quite right, of something "off" just beneath the surface. I love that at the beginning of a story—but I must put the emphasis there on *the beginning*. In a 460 page novel, I think it's a problem if said undercurrents stay nothing but undercurrents until page 425. The revelation ends up feeling rushed; the mystical climax oddly tacked on. It got to the point where I kind of wanted Janet's rescue of her Tam Lin stand-in to remain metaphorical, not magical—an atypical response for me. Especially when all the characters seem so blasé about what's just happened. I was like, "Hello! You only had about 20 pages to get used to this! How are you back to discussing Pope already?"

That said, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this book because I did enjoy the build-up so much, and because Janet is such a wonderful character. Also: it's a book where the hero's an English major! That, alone, makes me extraordinarily happy.

Melody says

Letting this one simmer a bit, I'm not ready to review it. Hell, I'm not sure I was ready to read it.

ETA:

Okay.

I loved the literary allusions. I found the characters, for the most part, quite believable- and the unbelievable ones were Myth Incarnate, so that was wonderful. The pacing was uneven and I'd have been just as happy had the last three years been as leisurely told as the first one. I'm familiar with the legend, and loved this treatment of it. Did I mention the rich literary trove this story is? "O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful! and yet again wonderful, and after that, out of all whooping!"

But.

The thing that I hated about this book is that it caused me no small measure of bitter regret. I try to never indulge in regret. I do not repine. My motto as regards regrets, like Lazarus Long's, has long been "When the ship lifts, all bills are paid." And this book, from the first page through the last, made me so sad for the chances I did not take, for the scholarship I scorned, for the English & Classics students I did not meet. It made me ache for something I threw away cavalierly and now can never have.

Francesca Forrest says

I really adored *The Dubious Hills* (review here), and I am sure I'll enjoy more stories set in that world. This version of *Tam Lin*, however, is not for me.

It's really a story about college friendships and the college experience, with just the barest whiffs of magic around the edges, if you sniff very, very hard. I'm pretty committed to the *Tam Lin*-as-*Tam Lin* story, and here it seems incidental.

The college scene is very authentic (the scene at the beginning where they're taking apart bunk beds could be nowadays), but I don't care for how clever everyone is about everything--it's all classics and English and theater and references to old books and translations. So... just not my thing.

I think *Juniper, Gentian, and Rosemary* will be more my thing. That's the next one I'll try.

Elena says

This reads like Dean's got something to prove. I've yet to see a character so undeservingly bullied by her author as Tina. She's pre-med, she doesn't read, she doesn't have the intellectual weapons to be awed by Janet, but that hardly make her deserving of the oceans of irritation that Janet bestows upon her "healthy hair".

Dean has her characters quote Keats and Shakespeare and the Iliad and lets the poets do the heavy lifting of giving flesh to their students. But the only bones in their bodies are to be their appreciation and quoting of said authors, to the point that I begin to wonder if they have anything of their own to say. Except about food. Oh, they have plenty to say about food. And as I'm talking about bones, I have one to pick with the afterword: "It would also be unwise, though certainly in accord with human nature, to identify the author with the protagonist." Oh come on, Dean! Of course Janet is you! You wouldn't be so defensive on behalf of someone else. And I don't appreciate the pat in the head of "in accord with human nature".

It's been said that this book is for english majors, and it's true: it's for english majors in the same sense that

“The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of Women” is for men. If not, you might wonder why you should so lightly be identified with your major in mostly unflattering manner. Or why these works you love should be so cavalierly lumped together (the greek, shakespeare and Scottish ballads have little in common), having not seen it in a college education. Perhaps you’ll be irritated that the book sees no need to acknowledge the laws of science even when it’s dealing with them, for example with unnecessarily magic pregnancies despite hormone treatments. Seriously, it’s almost like she *resents* science. You’ll wonder why this lack of internal coherence extends to ghosts and english actors. And if you do, you will not to forgive the clear writing tics and the fact that the entire emotional scope of Janet seems to include merely interest, maniacal laughter, isolation and crankiness. In other words, she is a bitch.

Do not take me on faith:

“Janet managed not to laugh again; if that had been her own quilt, she would have been furious.”

“Look,” said Janet, irritated, “if the thing you liked best to do in the world was read, and somebody offered to pay you room and board and give you a liberal-arts degree if you would just read for four years, wouldn’t you do it?”?

That is so not what college is about. I would dislike her solely on that sentence, but there’s much more.

There also seems to be a problem in Dean’s writing of suspense, which is non existent, and humour, that she refuses to share with her reader. She doesn’t laugh at funny things or quips or jokes, but at situations that she herself creates and often explains *after* they have their laugh. The Skeat and the Schiller episodes elicit authentic explosions of hilarity in Janet; but the reader is left cold, along with the characters too out of the loop, uncool and antiglamour to know the college folklore.

PS:I liked Keats and Shakespeare and the ballad of Tam Lin. But Dean I didn’t. If this review feels ad hominem, that’s because it is. I’ve got nothing really against the basic events of the plot.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

Gah!!

I almost never give 1 star to books I’ve actually finished, because they’re bound to have some redeeming quality that will at least bring the rating up to 2. But the best I can say about this one is that it’s not offensive--in fact, I share many of the author’s opinions--and that the prose was at least competent enough for me to continue reading, but that isn’t very redeeming when it so utterly failed to entertain that I threw it against a wall. (I really did!)

The (alleged!) premise of this book is that it’s a retelling of the fairy tale/ballad of the same name, set in the early 1970’s in a small Minnesota liberal arts college. I say “alleged” because the fantasy element is only occasionally hinted at until the last 50 pages or so out of 456. The rest is “Daily Life of an English Major.” (On reflection I’ve decided to not even put it on my “fantasy” shelf; it hasn’t earned that.) In fact, over 300 pages describe the protagonist’s freshman year, even though the events of the ballad don’t happen until she’s a senior. And, seriously, nothing happens.

But don’t just take my word for it. Here’s a representative sample:

"She put the books she was holding neatly on her lower shelf, shrugged out of her pink nylon jacket and hung it over the back of her desk chair, tucked her gray Blackstock T-shirt into her pink corduroy pants, put the jacket back on, zipped it to just below the Blackstock seal on the T-shirt so that the lion seemed to be peering over the zipper pull, and said, 'Let's go, before the line gets too long.'"

And the whole book is like that! Endless minutiae (and bizarre fashion choices), with every little thing described in detail no matter how irrelevant it is. Now, I have nothing against slow pacing; the right author can write a brilliant book consisting almost entirely of minutiae. Read *The Remains of the Day* if you don't believe me. But the difference between that book and this one is that here, the minutiae doesn't mean anything; there's no payoff; it doesn't advance the plot or illuminate the characters or their relationships. It's just endless daily life, the stuff that's moderately interesting to live through but gets boring when even your friends talk about it too long--and how much worse, then, when the people living it are fictional characters?

In *Tam Lin*, we sit through every meeting Janet has with her academic advisor to pick her classes. The merits of various professors and their teaching styles and syllabi are discussed. Every time Janet and her friends want food, we see them weigh which dining hall to eat in (the one with a view of the lake? or the one resembles a dungeon? did I mention that the architecture of generically-named buildings I could never remember is also much discussed?). And of course, there's the books. Endless discussions of literature--by which I mean, for the most part, old-school poetry and plays--seem to substitute in the author's mind for both plot and character development.

In fact, there's so little tension in this book that halfway through, Janet realizes the biggest problem in her life is that one of her roommates, while a perfectly nice girl, doesn't understand Janet's literary obsession. And that Janet therefore finds her tedious. What the....?! Did the author miss the creative writing class where they talked about how a plot requires *conflict*??

SPOILER

And then we get to the end, and the retelling bit plays out exactly like the ballad, and exactly as Janet was told it would. And then the (alleged!) villain responds with a disapproving stare and exits stage left. I say "alleged" because the most detailed description we ever get of her supposed acts of villainy is basically, "Well, there's a rumor she's slept with a married person sometime." How truly menacing!

/SPOILER

I could keep going.... the indistinct personalities, the mysteries and foreshadowing that are heavily built up and then come to nothing, the use of unexplained, apparently magically-induced memory loss and general indifference to keep Janet from figuring out the entire (alleged!) plot early on, the dialogue that's probably 50% literary quotes, the 12 pages describing a play blow-by-blow, which even then fail to explain it so that it makes sense!.... but in the spirit of what I think Dean was trying to do with this book, I am going to recommend some other books instead.

So: if you want to read about college women in the early 1970s, try Nunez's *The Last of Her Kind*. If you want cultlike groups of Classics majors at small-town liberal arts colleges, read Tatt's *The Secret History*. If you like the idea of pretentious college students combined with fantasy elements, try Grossman's *The Magicians*. Or, for less pretension and more coming-of-age, Walton's *Among Others* (okay, I had mixed feelings about that one, but at least it has some plot and character development to go with its science fiction references). And if you're here because you want a fairy tale retelling where the girl saves the guy from an evil sorceress, check out something by Juliet Marillier, preferably *Daughter of the Forest*.

But if you really do want to read a book that describes liberal-arts-college life in exhaustive detail and talks endlessly about the sorts of works only an English major could love? Then by all means, read *Tam Lin*. You can have my copy!

Margaret says

*O I forbid you, maidens a', That wear gowd on your hair,
To come or gae by Carterhaugh, For young Tam Lin is there.*

These are the first lines of the best-known version of the Scottish ballad *Tam Lin*, about a young man doomed to be given to hell by the faerie queen, and the young woman who saves him. It's a ballad whose fascination is enduring and which has inspired a number of retellings, of which Pamela Dean's is my favorite (followed closely by Diana Wynne Jones's *Fire and Hemlock*).

Dean's version of the story is set in the Midwestern college of Blackstock (based on Dean's alma mater, Carleton). When Janet Carter enters college, she and her roommates, Molly and Tina, fall in with a small group of charismatic students, who are all closely connected with the Classics department and its Professor Medeous, an enigmatic but fascinating woman. As Janet wends her way through her four years at college, she learns more and more about Medeous and her followers and eventually finds herself entangled in their intrigues.

Dean spins Janet's story into the tale of *Tam Lin* in a slow, subtle, and gorgeous way. Hints of the unearthly begin early, from the ghost who throws books from the windows of Janet's dorm, to the mysterious horse riders she encounters on Hallowe'en. Yet much of the book's charm lies in its exploration of college life. It makes me nostalgic, even though I didn't go to a small college and my experiences were nothing like Janet's. The excitement of learning, the thrills of first love, the sheer difference of living on your own, away from your parents; these are all there.

I think I'm particularly drawn to the book because of its interest in literature and in the Classics. I love the bit where Janet and her friends are going through the steam tunnels below campus and come upon some graffiti on the walls: the opening lines of Homer's *Iliad*, in Greek, whereupon the Classics majors read it aloud and offer a couple of translations (one of which is Chapman's Homer, immortalized in the Keats sonnet).

Nikki says

How to review this? I have complicated thoughts. For a start: I love the ballad(s, there's various versions), and I've read quite a few *Tam Lin* retellings now too. I expected to like *Tam Lin*, per Pamela Dean, quite a lot, because it came highly recommended and because of all the other things I was told were involved in this retelling — the 'college as magic garden' aspect, primarily. And there's a lot to like about that, because I did experience university as a magical garden in many ways, and I loved the utter focus on college, on learning, on cramming in everything you can. And that lovely feeling of finding something you didn't expect to love through study and the right teacher, and all the possibilities, and...

It is a bit thick with references; though Jo Walton's review suggests that it never leans on the references

without explaining them, sometimes that led to the weird sense of being told the plots of all the plays mentioned within the novel. It's a little bit infodumpy, even though it suits the whole atmosphere.

And I do like the portrayal of women being different and finding ways to get along anyway; young couples working out things like contraception and how to fit in seeing each other between their studies; men and women forming friendship groups together that aren't completely rife with sex and jealousy (although there is some of that).

I liked the slow unfolding of it, too. It helped to know (again from Jo's review) that the pacing of it is based on the pacing of the ballad (not sure which exact version), with the build-up taking most of the song and the denouement a verse: that is very much how it is in the novel, too. And I did like that I needed to watch for the references, keep my eyes open for the hints, that somehow ghosts and people who could've stepped out of Shakespeare's plays came to seem normal.

It did frustrate me, though, how long it took for there to be payoff — how long it took for it to be confirmed as a fantasy novel, and not as, say, Janet being unstable (I knew it wasn't that, but I apparently like my fantasy more overt), and how long it took for the two characters who turn out to be the main ones to actually really find each other. It took literally until 85% before I could see how the relationships could possibly work out like the ballad.

When it did come together, it was very satisfying. But it takes time, and you have to want to spend the time in the magical garden, spend time with these very young, very serious, very earnest characters who are just beginning to go about meaningful work and love and relationships. I can see why some people bounce off this one, I really can. I think without the strong recommendations I received plus my knowledge of the ballad (and my love for Fairport Convention's version of it!), I might not have stuck it out.

Originally posted here.
