



The Interior Life

Katherine Blake

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"Too active a fantasy life can be a dangerous things". For Susan this is literally true. She's perfectly happy in her role as wife and mother in suburbia. Or perhaps not perfectly happy, because the fantasy world she slips into every so often is very different from her everyday life. . . .

The Interior Life Details

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Author : Katherine Blake

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From Reader Review The Interior Life for online ebook

Lis Carey says

Susan is perfectly happy as a suburban housewife in 1980s America. Well, perhaps not perfectly happy, or she wouldn't be periodically slipping away into a fantasy life, would she? As long as she keeps it within bounds...

She's periodically sharing the minds of sometimes Lady Amalia, a noblewoman with the Sight, and sometimes her servant and general right hand, Marianella, and occasionally others. She sees what they see, learns what they learn, about the creeping Darkness that threatens the land of Demoura.

As long as she doesn't let her fantasy life affect real life...

Except Amalia, Marianella, and the others provide inspiration, example, and even advice, that affects Susan's marriage, family, social life, and even her budding volunteer career. Susan, her husband Fred, Fred's coworkers, and Susan's friends and PTA associates, are as interesting and sometimes strange as the characters in Demoura.

This is an odd book, hard to describe, and absolutely warm, engaging, fun, and a positive addition to the life of anyone who reads it. It "came out, and immediately went back in again," in 1990, due to the publisher having no idea how to market something this different from their usual fare at the time. Potential readers missed out then, but now the magic of the internet means you don't have to track down a hard to find paperback more than twenty years old. Do so; you won't regret it. Susan and her friends, in Demoura and in the "real world," will brighten your life.

Highly recommended.

I bought this book.

D.M. Dutcher says

A housewife somehow creates (or is it contacts?) a fantasy world and mentally communicates back and forth with its denizens. They give her suggestions to improve her life, and she helps them too.

Unfortunately the book is pretty bad. One of the problems is that there's no transition between Sue's normal life and the fantasy world; you'll be reading one paragraph about her doing some chore, and the very next paragraph goes into what one of the other characters is doing. Not chapters, paragraphs. There's no italics or any other visual way to set up the transition, and it doesn't really make for a fun reading experience.

What's also bad is that Sue herself really does nothing but comment and talk to the others. Her own life is a particularly dull chronicle of a middle-class housewife, and her self-improvement runs out of steam halfway through the book. At the end it gets pretty bad when you have some dramatic battle interrupted by Sue's speaking in front of the PTA or dealing with a bout of appendicitis happening to one of her kids.

They also never really get into why or how the fantasy world exists. It's odd, because it's not like Sue is tied

into only one character there; she seems to be able to mentally talk to many of them, and multiple characters see things happening to her and comment on it, offering suggestions. It's done oddly in that they don't really react to Sue being there; they deal with her as naturally as a friend in the same room. It just happens, and while it's compelling at the start, the lack of explanation starts to grate at the end. It's not mental illness, and you're never really sure it's a real fantasy land. You don't know, and you keep not knowing till the end of the book.

As others have said, the book just stops at the end. It's not particularly good getting there, with a rather boring romance between the girl with the sight and another character that came out of left field. It gets hard too to care about the other characters as you really only get a sustained narrative with Amalia; the others tend to have shorter screen times, and the choppy transitions between worlds makes it hard to keep them in your mind. Same with Sue's children and husband; they get as much time as Randy the music guy and Siobhan.

I'd call this a "good bad book." It is good at start, and the idea is smart. The writing isn't too bad, either. But it starts to drag midway, and without either putting Sue physically into the other world or doing something to temper the weird transitions and haphazard stories nothing keeps your interest. More of a lost opportunity than anything.

Misha says

I read this because Jo Walton wrote about it glowingly in "What Made This Book So Great." It is a domestic time-slip fantasy in which Sue, a mother of three (the back of my copy got it wrong and said she has 2 kids) slips in between doing dishes and cleaning house to a fantasy world that may or may not be in her imagination alone. The deeper she gets into the fantasy world, the more she tries to reinvent herself in her own life--making changes in her PTA, sprucing up her house and marriage, learning about computers (the early 90s details of old computers read as hilarious now), running from a creepy upper exec at her husband's firm and trying to learn more about medieval music and life to connect with her medieval/fantasy interior world. I actually found the realistic bits the most compelling, so it didn't entirely work as a fantasy for me, but I enjoyed it nonetheless.

Berni Phillips says

Blake (a.k.a. Dorothy Heydt) chose an interested format, a generic fantasy novel mixed in with a contemporary slice of family life. The fantasy is the imaginings of the suburban housewife. Alas, I found the suburban housewife's story line and characters more interesting. The fantasy was just too generic for me. Through the interaction of the two, we see the housewife becoming more efficient and competent. Unfortunately, I didn't find that much more believable than the fantasy story.

Isis says

This was a delightful read! Sue the suburban housewife daydreams about a fantasy-medieval world under siege by a (both literal and metaphorical) Darkness, not in the sense of creating the world in her imagination, but as though she's watching events there unfold. Her involvement and identification with the people there, particularly with the Lady Amalia, who must fight the Darkness, and her chatelaine Marianella, who has to

organize and feed the household and clean the castle, helps her fight her own (metaphorical) forces of Darkness, and keep her own household running smoothly. Sue's quotidian life - helping her husband get a promotion while simultaneously fending off the amorous advances of the big boss, participating at the PTA, wrangling her children - becomes more interesting in light of the double story, which is never too on-the-nose with parallels, and the best parts are when Amalia and Marianella comment on her situations and advise her on what she should do. And the events in "Demoura" are also made more interesting by Sue's take on them, and the comparisons she draws with her own life.

While I was reading, I felt it reminded me of Jo Walton's writing, but then I read some reviews that mentioned that this was recommended by Walton, and so maybe I had actually seen them before reading, and that's what primed my mental outlook. It is a bit dated - it was first published in 1990 - and there's a bit of gender essentialism that to me feels even older than 1990. On the other hand, it's kind of nice to see the crucial importance of the domestic sphere being acknowledged in fiction; it's nice to have a heroine who teaches herself more skills and learns more culture not so that she can stop being a housewife and get a job, but so that she can be a more effective household manager and a happier person.

This book is available for free on the author's website, <http://kithrup.com/~djheydt/>. I recommend setting your ereader to use the specified fonts rather than your own, because although they are not always easy to read, they help delineate the different worlds within this book. (There are actually three different worlds: Sue's ordinary life, the fantasy world, and a spirit world within that fantasy world. Each has its own font.) There are a few weird editing/OCR/?? errors - one section of the book seemed to have commas randomly sprinkled throughout, but as I can't find it again, it might have been an artifact of my ereader app.

Rachel Neumeier says

So, recently this book came up in some comment thread somewhere, sorry, don't remember where, but in a general "I've never met anybody else who's heard of this wonderful book" sort of context.

Well, I have – at least one other commenter had, too – and it is good. Published in 1990 and never re-issued, so, like almost every other good book ever written, it has thoroughly faded from sight. But it's worth looking up, because it's not only good, it's unusual. It's two stories that braid around each other: a story about Sue, a Typical Suburban Housewife, getting her life together and, as it were, finding herself without moving a step; and it's a story about Marianella and Lady Amalia, who are trying to stop the Darkness spreading over their land, and Aumery, unwilling servant of the Darkness.

So, two stories. It's actually rather rare that a single page doesn't contain a bit from both. Let me show you the first transition, which happens just four pages into the novel. I'm going to rewrite it just a tiny bit so it will read smoothly, since I want to show how this works without retyping the entire beginning of the novel. Anyway:

The chocolate scurf on the front burner had softened, and Sue leaned hard on the sponge and scrubbed away . . . she dropped the sponge into the bleach solution and looked out the kitchen window again. The sparrows had taken fright at a dog, cat, or toddler and flown away. The lucky stiffs. Above the pyrancantha, something glinted in the sky, a 747 maybe, or a sea gull, the sun bright on its wings, high above the sparkling sea. She stood at a white-washed wall,

chest high, that ran along the top of the cliff north and south from the sea-keep. She could feel the grittiness of the mortar under her fingers, and the pressure against her breasts as she leaned far over the wall to see the shore below. A strip of clean sand ran along the cliff's foot, smooth and white.

Sue is now in the persona of Marianella, who has just arrived with Lady Amalia at the abandoned keep. The story is going to shift back and forth from this point on, but the lines between the worlds are going to blur even more than the bit above makes it seem, because Marianella and Amalia comment freely on the details of Sue's life: what she could cook for supper, what kind of dress she should wear to an important party, how to extricate herself from an awkward situation with her husband's boss.

Sue can also peek into the other world almost at will, shifting pov between Marianella and Amalia to keep track of what's going on. She can comment on events that are occurring there, just as the others can comment on her life. When Amalia meets a suspicious character who spins her a tall tale about his past, Sue comments, "And if you believe that, I have a bridge I can sell you." And she knows that Amalia doesn't believe him either, because at that moment, Sue is simultaneously in her own pov and in Amalia's pov.

Now, the situation confronting Lady Amalia and her world is dire. Here we have a pretty standard fantasy plot: a terrible threat, heroism and last stands, romance and star-crossed lovers, all that. It's a good enough story, but what's surprising is how juxtaposing this story with Sue's ordinary life makes all the tiny events of her life somehow much more interesting. Sue does confront real problems, but they are very ordinary problems. Yet reading about her life does not slow the story down or bore the reader; quite the reverse, as the reader actually becomes invested in Sue's life at least as much as in the fate of the fantasy world. (At least, that was my experience as a reader.)

As it happens, I like a story where someone gets her life in order and comes to understand herself better and grows in confidence and realizes she does actually still love her own husband. Even so, without the fantasy story braided in with Sue's contemporary life, the latter would be boring. But put the two stories together, and somehow Sue's personal story becomes more interesting and appealing than the violence and adventure and heroism of the fantasy.

As a writer, I think *An Interior Life* must have been fun to write. A challenge, but fun. I don't know of any other novel that weaves two stories together in quite this way. It's well worth picking up if you find a copy.

Walter Underwood says

This novel is really unlike anything else in fantasy, and that is a good thing. There are two intertwined narratives, each quite conventional, but the combination is unique. Is it a surprise that The Darkness is conquered? No. Is it a surprise that the PTA succeeds in getting a new computer lab built? No. Both in the same novel? That is new.

Jo Walton points out another rarity, the book takes housework seriously. Baking bread, getting homework done, painting the living room, gardening the front yard, all these are on an equal footing with getting the Heart of Darkness to the Duke of War. Really.

P. Enge says

This was one of those 'change my life' books. I was a young adult living in a brand new big city, and while waiting for my car to be fixed. (No friendly ride home and back to get it like in my small town.) I walked across to the grocery store and picked up this book. I read half of it while waiting, and finished it in a day or two. I still reread it on a regular basis.

Just_ann_now says

Oh you guys, this book, I can't even. I don't usually do synopses of books I've read, but in this case, I'll give it a go: once her youngest child heads off to school, a suburban housewife, Sue, discovers a medieval-esque fantasy world. Sue isn't transported into the world - it's not a time-travel or portal fantasy - and Sue isn't a frustrated novelist who suddenly is inspired to create the world now that she has leisure to do so. The world simply exists, and Sue is able to witness events there as they unfold. She can communicate with some of the residents there - and their comments about Sue's world are hilarious! - but they don't directly effect the events in each others' worlds at all.

Through her introduction to this world, Sue begins to change. She develops an interest in classical music and medieval history. She becomes more adventurous with cooking (and, apparently, sex.) She paints her home, redecorates, gardens, sews more elegant clothing for herself. She involves herself in the PTA, and discovers unexpected leadership skills. She encourages her husband towards more education, and begins to attend college classes herself. She becomes more aware of her self-worth, and those around her begin to become aware of it as well.

(While this is all happening, fantasy-world things are happening in the other world, and they are pretty-standard fantasy world things: war, magic, romance, etc. As simple as Sue's world is, the fantasy world is the less compelling of the two here.)

Though some elements of the story are almost hilariously dated (the TV shows they watch, the home computer they purchase) the bones of the story are good. Any of us who have taken up the study of the Elvish language, or horseback riding, or stained glass, or have become politically active, because of something we've read that's become so real and essential to us will find much to love in this book. Which -

best of all! - is available as a free download from the author's website: <http://kithrup.com/~djheydt/>

I spent Inauguration Day in a pleasant cocoon of this book, tea, and cookies. I can't hide from the world forever - and Sue certainly wasn't hiding from her life within the other world - but I can take comfort in an unusual tale, well told. So there's another addition to my Comfort Reads shelf.

Ria says

This book has a very interesting concept. Bored housewife creates a fantasy world inside her head, and she entertains herself by following along with the adventures that the characters are having. By following their lives, learning more about them, she slowly begins to find more peace and comfort and inspiration for her own life, improving her lifestyle and loving herself more because of it.

But toward the end of the book, it all falls apart. I don't mean that the plot begins to change or that the events become hectic and fast-paced and danger lurks around every corner. I mean the story, the writing, just goes downhill. Hints are given that perhaps the fantasy world inside the main character's head isn't quite so contained as she thought. People in the real world seem to react to what fantasy-world characters say or do, tantalizing suggestions are made that things could get interesting in that regard very soon.

And then... the book ends. It feels like the author just got bored of writing it and decided to do a slap-bad cop-out ending and forgot to tie up the loose ends. Of course, the loose ends in the real world are tied up, the story in the fantasy world comes to a conclusion, but the little cross-overs remain unexplained, left dangling. It was a sore disappointment to not find out what was going on with that little plot twist. Really, how did that one slip by her agent, her editor, her readers? I can't have been the only one who noticed that.

Thus it surprises me that a published author can get away with the same tired tricks I used to use in creative writing classes in elementary school to get out of writing long assignments.

Her writing style is fine. It flows well, is easy to follow. Her idea was interesting and fairly well executed, until the end comes close and plot threads are just left to hang. If it weren't for that, I'd rate this book much higher, and recommend it to people. As it is, this book has become my cautionary tale for what NOT to do when writing a novel. Sad that it had to be so.

Barbara Gordon says

A long-time favourite and 'comfort book' for me. Bored housewife Susan discovers her fantasy life is epic fantasy, and the characters and story in her head illuminate and expand her understanding of her 'real life'. Susan's tribulations with the PTA, her husband's promotion and her kids intertwine with the struggle against the Dark in a fantasy land. Blake makes both stories gripping.

What I particularly love about the story is that fantasising is presented as something that strengthens Susan, gives her perspective on her problems and shows her how the issues of her real life are as meaningful as any epic battle. Too often fantasy or daydreaming is seen as escapism, as something that a girl must give up as she enters the adult world, as if the only way to embrace life is to abandon dreams.

Sineala says

I came across this in the local used bookstore and had the vague feeling that I'd seen it recommended somewhere before and that the author was a pseudonym for someone I liked. So I took a chance, brought the book home, googled it, and discovered that Jo Walton had recommended it and that the author was Dorothy J. Heydt. Score! (Why, yes, I did misspend a lot of my misspent youth lurking on rec.arts.sf.* and in Trek fandom.)

This book is really unusual to read -- a cozy, domestic story about a bored housewife who invents epic fantasy in her head, and the characters inspire her to become a better, more productive person in RL, becoming more involved in her community and suchlike. In almost every other story I have read of this type, it eventually turns out that Fantasy Is Bad For You and it is given up so that the main character can focus on Reality. But not here! Here, it is actually a good thing. And it also positively values traditionally feminine and domestic tasks, which is also really weird for epic fantasy, because those are not so much usually about being good wives and mothers.

People who are going to snicker at descriptions of the cutting-edge technology and fashions of the past should be aware that this book is from 1990. It mostly didn't bother me (some of the remarks about gender and orientation aside), but, then, things like that usually don't; I think it's still readable.

Anyway. It is (of course) well-written, and it's really sweet and affirming. The epic fantasy plot is nice enough, and I kind of like the RL plot a lot, even though it is ridiculously small-scale compared to everything else. Definitely recommended, and I hope the author someday puts it out in e-book, with the fonts handled better somehow.

(Oh, right, the fonts. Reality and Fantasy are differentiated by fonts. The fonts are unfortunately really, really similar. You can generally tell by context which world the story is in, but it would be nice if they had been a little clearer.)

Courtney says

I borrowed this from a friend after her GoodReads review piqued my curiosity. Sometimes a book catches me so fiercely that I have to have my friends and family hide it from me so I can continue my daily life of food, work, and sleep. This book was one of those for me. I can say that it is not for everyone. It switches points of view without much warning. It has some antiquated ideas. But there is growth, there is dignity, there are real world problems, love, and humor. I'm already recommending it to almost anyone who will stop long enough to listen to me.

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

Three stars more for what it tried to do than whether or not it actually succeeded. This was one of the books I would always see blurbbed in the back of the Baen books I loved when I was a kid, back when (a) it was reasonable to include a mail order form in the back of books and (b) I didn't actually have money to think about ordering books via mail. ;) It always sounded interesting, but I never did anything about it. I stumbled across a copy in a used bookstore in another city back in November, and picked it up on a whim.

By reading, I learned that the blurb is full of lies. (As they so frequently are.) It implies that the protagonist's imaginings become a danger to her somehow. Well, they don't. (Unless you think they reach the point of dissociation in a clinical sense; my take on this after one reading is "maybe.") Instead they motivate her to make a number of positive life changes. Maybe to the point of stretching believability, but I like that this book is about an ordinary housewife who is portrayed in a positive/normal way. There aren't too much of those in spec fic — probably because such stories have no built-in audience. (Or so the marketing departments would argue, I suspect.)

Like Jo Walton, I am surprised that this was published by Baen; it doesn't seem like their sort of thing at all. But I don't know who else would have published it, so I'm glad that they did. Jo Walton's review is here, and I recommend it and the comment trail. (At least the first few comments; I'm not done yet.) Finally, Katherine Blake is a pen name of Dorothy J. Heydt, whose work you may know from various Marion Zimmer Bradley anthologies (mostly the Sword & Sorceress ones). You can tell that a SCAdian wrote this — the medieval details are very accurate.

Elizabeth says

Interior Life is another book I'd heard about from Jo Walton's What Makes This Book So Great. My best friend was also intrigued by Walton's summary of the novel & luckily came across two copies at a used bookstore! Happy day!

Blake's story begins with Sue, a housewife, struggling to bring some order to her day & daydreaming in order to keep her mind off of the housework drudgery. But as days go by, Sue's fantasy of Lady Amalia & her maidservant Marianella becomes a full-fledged world peopled with varied characters. Amalia Greywell, a highborn lady with Sight, tries to solve her brother's Andri disappearance & stumbles upon clues that lead to the insidious Shadow growing over the land. As Amalia searches & encounters others in her world, Sue develops outside interests & becomes more involved in her community--on her own quest for a life that pleases her. The two stories intertwine & affect one another as the story unfolds.

One way I could describe this story is The Neverending Story for adults. Learning about Amalia's circumstances only deepens Sue's understanding of her own world & how to act within it. Interior Life states that not only is a fantasy a healthy exercise of the mind, it can also be a compass pointing to one's true self. Unlike many similar books that eventually require the protagonist to put aside their imaginings, Blake's story illustrates how the two "realities" can live together. Like Neverending Story, the characters of Interior Life live beyond its pages. Life can also be a challenge to explain: a straightforward telling of Sue's & Amalia's stories can seem like common or cliched versions of domestic or high-fantasy novels. The novel's magic lies in the interesting twinings & echoes between the two characters & the adult decisions they make.

If you are curious, I would repeat Walton's advice and tell you that the book is currently out-of-print & if you can find a copy, snatch it up! Readers are in for an memorable read.
