



Harrowing the Dragon

Patricia A. McKillip

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A fantasist without equal, Patricia A. McKillip has created worlds of intricate beauty and unforgettably nuanced characters. For 25 years, she's drawn readers into her spell, spinning modern-day fables with a grace rarely seen. Now she presents a book of previously uncollected short stories, full of beautiful dragons, rueful princesses, and handsome bards, and written in the gorgeous--and often surprisingly funny--prose she's known for. This is her world, wrapped up in the finery of fairy tales.

Harrowing the Dragon Details

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From Reader Review Harrowing the Dragon for online ebook

Laura says

As much as I intensely love Patricia McKillip's work, her short stories tend to be pretty hit or miss for me. Of these stories, I particularly enjoyed A Troll and Two Roses, Lady of the Skulls, The Lion and the Lark and The Witches of Junket.

Kathy Davie says

An omnibus of fifteen fairy tales given a twist by McKillip.

My Take

In general, I find McKillip's writing to be lyric poetry. In this group of tales, she seems to be more musical.

The Stories

"**Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath**" was a very frustrating tale of a dragon fighter taking on a dragon whose only fault...so far...is 11 months of winter.

"**A Matter of Music**" was very good and, true to its title, revolves around music. It also brought in a reference to another of McKillip's stories, "**In the Forest of Serre**". It made me think of "pagan" harvest festivals, people's belief systems, and the power of love whether it be of people or one's passions.

"**A Troll and Two Roses**" made me think of several fairy tales mingled into one. *Snow White and Rose Red* and all the tales of bridge trolls. Who knew that a troll could have a heart?

"**Baba Yaga and the Sorcerer's Son**" shows that even Baba Yaga has a sense of humor...and a heart!

"**Fellowship of the Dragon**" is an odd twist on all the fairy tales in which the various heroes, heroines in our case, are distracted by magical tricks and wander off from their intended paths. I did like our winning heroine's approach when she found her "treasure"...what a comeuppance that was!

"**Lady of the Skulls**" is a fine entrapment allowing self-judgment to punish the lesser. A most surprising ending.

"**Snow Queen**" starts out so sadly and ends so well. A tale that every woman should take to heart and hold a true path.

"**Ash, Wood, Fire**" was nearly incomprehensible. Taking place in a castle kitchen, we observe the frenetic actions as meals are prepared except everyone is addressed as the items they are in charge of: Onion, Fire, Cream, Pastry, Kitchen-Beetle, etc. It does have a lovely incarnation of an ending.

"**Stranger**" is a scam perpetrated by an artist of colors whose visual art is appreciated by a local weaver. She is entranced by the visual feast but appalled at his use of his skills. A most unexpected and lovely ending.

"**Transmutations**" is a curious tale of students and professor as they explore the mysteries of life in a

laboratory pursuing the alchemical arts.

"**Lion and the Lark**" is a twist on Grimms' *The Singing, Soaring Lark*.

"**Witches of Junket**" is a contemporary setting for a family of witches who must battle an ancient threat.

"**Star-Crossed**" provides an inside look at what "really happened" between Romeo and Juliet.

"**Voyage into the Heart**" a mage uses a young virgin to entice a unicorn to be slain for its horn. The sight of the slaughter causes the mage to reconsider.

"**Toad**" is a more realistic look, from the frog's perspective, of the character of the princess who kisses the toad. Poor king. Poor toad.

The Cover

I've suddenly realized of what McKillip's covers remind me of those gorgeous, highly-lacquered Russian boxes. They have that same quality of luminous, jeweled depth. Much like her writing. In this case, the cover is of an unearthly white horse posed deep in the forest ridden by a Valkyrie with her cape floating behind her.

J.Aleksandr Wootton says

It has been some few years since I read anything by Patricia McKillip; I was unsatisfied by her *Riddlemaster* trilogy, although I liked its first installment pretty well. I tend not to enjoy stories of the general formula: "hero steadily becomes more powerful until practically invincible, yet remains uncorrupted by said power due to his/her humble, kindhearted, and/or underdog upbringing, thus becoming able to defeat the tale's one-dimensional, nigh-omnipotent villain and stop his/her world-ending schemes coming to pass."

This collection, however, was quite different. I was transported by nearly every tale in it, a remarkable feat - especially considering that I read these stories while sitting in that most mundane of places, a car repair shop waiting room. They are exquisite. When they aren't original, they either peep around the corners of familiar fairytales - showing up the cobwebs, the side passages, the "minor" characters murmuring about the periphery - or model a new tale after the pattern of the old. McKillip's writing is superb and her stories are haunting, or funny, or thoughtful. Here's a good book for a rainy day... or to keep in the car for when you've got to kill some time in a waiting room.

Risa says

Just as good the second, or third, time through.

Shay says

Average rating: 2.3

Harrowing the Dragon: ***

A Matter of Music: ****
A Troll and Two Roses: ***
Baba Yaga and the Sorceror's Son: **
Fellowship of the Dragon: ****
Lady of the Skulls: ***
Snow Queen: **
Ash, Wood, Fire: *
Stranger: *
Transmutations: *
Lion and the Lark: ****
Witches of Junket: *
Star-Crossed: **
Voyage into the Heart: **
Toad: **

Margaret says

There are fifteen stories here, from 1982's "The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath" to 1999's "Toad", and the quality is, as one would expect from McKillip, very high. For me, standouts were the title story, of a young man who returns to a island of perpetual ice to seek a sleeping dragon and of the young woman who tries to stop him; "The Lark and the Lion", a fairy tale with overtones of "Beauty and the Beast", "Psyche and Eros", and "East of the Sun, West of the Moon"; "A Matter of Music", where matters of music collide with matters of politics; and "The Snow Queen", a modern retelling of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale.

A couple of the stories, notably "Ash, Wood, Fire", falter due to too much language and not enough plot (an occasional failing of McKillip's), and I didn't care for "Star-Crossed", in which Verona investigates the deaths of *Romeo and Juliet*, which just seemed rather pointless to me (plus I've never been fond of that play).

Overall, though, this is a lovely collection, essential for McKillip fans and an excellent introduction to her work for those who don't yet know it.

Cathy Jung says

This book is a collection of short stories. Patricia McKillip seems to have no end of wonderful ideas for stories, most filled with magic. Very much liked this book. Can't wait to try another.

Duckbait says

Reading *Harrowing the Dragon* is like taking a look in an artist's studio: it's rewarding, it's surprising, and you're going to see some shit that makes you just go, "whaaat".

This is not one of McKillip's better collections -- it's occasionally obscure and sometimes the prose goes very purple. Some of those stories felt like experimental ideas. If this is your first time reading McKillip, just

jump right to the newer collections.

It is still a McKillip book, so it's full of inventive ideas rendered in dreamlike prose: a dragon that wraps around an island, a musician who spins monsters out of clouds, a world in which bards are honored above kings, and a city encased in eternal winter among others. There's also a playfulness to a lot of those stories and a sense of humor.

From a historical perspective, I found this collection really interesting. McKillip plays with ideas here that I haven't really seen in her novels or later anthology before, and quite a few of those stories are edited by big names -- Terri Winding and Jane Yolen appear as editors, as well as Stephen Donaldson. (Incidentally, the story that first appeared in a Donaldson collection reminded me a lot of Donaldson's *The Mirror of Her Dreams* in hindsight, minus some of the skeeviness).

Going through the list:

"Harrowing the Dragon": I liked the atmosphere of this one, but honestly, I have no idea what happened there.

"A Matter of Music": A bard goes to her first position at court and ends up entangled in intrigue. There's an impressive amount of worldbuilding in a small space. This felt like a close cousin or a practice run of *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*, featuring cycles of violence, forgiveness, rebellious noble lords, and a lord of Sere, who like Coren from Eld, has a thing for art and love affairs that are a seriously bad idea. (Maybe there's an interworld bar where they get drinks together and talk about feelings?)

"A Troll and Two Roses": Cute and sweet little fairy tale.

"Baba Yaga and the Sorcerer's Son": This one didn't seem to go anywhere, but I loved the style of it: it's whimsical but sinister.

"The Fellowship of the Dragon": The standout of the collection. A group of women go on a quest to rescue a young man from a dragon. Funny, clever, elegant, and I'm impressed at the number of characters McKillip manages to keep more or less distinct. Also, a (view spoiler)

"The Snow Queen": A modern take on a married Gerda and Kay (guest starring a robber girl, a hilarious diner waitress, and the language of flowers!) should totally be my jam, but there are some bizarre things that happen toward the ending. While there's some cutting and hilarious dialogue, there's also some that jolted me right out of the story.

"Ash, Wood, and Fire": I didn't understand this one at all and I didn't care enough to try.

"The Stranger": The dialogue went a bit too purple and dramatic even for me here, but the imagery and the ideas are really cool.

"Transmutations": Felt experimental and ends abruptly, but I am increasingly fond of this one, though I won't turn down a romance novel sequel that continues the story.

"The Lion and the Lark": Hilarious and sweet and romantic fairy tale!

"The Witches of Junket": I don't recall much of this one, not helped by the fact that I kept getting some of the

names confused.

"Star-Crossed": An noir story about the watchman assigned to investigate the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. He has relationship problems too. It's a cool idea (and feels very noir!), but I don't think it works well in execution. It spends a lot of time on the watchman going back and learning things the reader already knows about Romeo and Juliet.

"Lady of the Skulls": This was a sweet little story.

"Voyage into the Heart": I keep forgetting this one exists, but the ideas here are interesting.

"Toad": I liked this one -- it turns "The Princess and the Frog" into something enigmatic and creepy and deliciously ambiguous..

Chhavi says

I skipped a few and didn't care for a couple (transmutations + Ash, wood, fire) but I really loved a few of these stories: the Lion and the Lark was outstanding as was A Matter of Music. I liked A Troll and Two Roses, the Baba Yaga story, Lady of the Skulls and the Fellowship of the Dragon too.

Theo Logos says

I read over half of these stories before giving up on this collection. I don't intend to come back to it. McKillip's Riddle Master trilogy is a sentimental favorite of mine, but I have searched in vain to find another of her works that interests me equally. This short story collection looked promising, but try as I might, I couldn't labor through it. Its best stories are thick with atmosphere, mood, and scenery, but perilously thin in any characters that are much more than cyphers. Almost all are too long by half. None pulled me along insistently or let me lose myself in it. When I realized that reading the collection had become a chore rather than a pleasure, I gave it up.

Nikki says

As you might expect from Patricia McKillip, this is a lovely collection — some of the stories are just beautiful, and her writing always is. 'The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath' is a strong point, as you'd expect from the fact that the collection is named after it, and I enjoyed 'A Matter of Music', 'The Stranger' and 'Lady of the Skulls', too.

The lighter, more humorous ones like 'A Troll and Two Roses' and 'Baba Yaga and the Sorcerer's Son' are still well written, but the tone doesn't work for me. Mostly, it just doesn't fit with the dream-like prose-poetry I expect from McKillip (and which she delivers, even with the lighter stories).

It's a nice collection, but not a favourite by any means. It's one of those I'll keep because I enjoy the way McKillip writes rather than because I particularly want to revisit most of the stories. This sounds like faint praise, but McKillip's writing really is beautiful.

Reviewed for The Bibliophilian.

Katie Daniels says

The title story of this collection is my favorite. The Stranger was my second favorite. This was my first time encountering anything by McKillip that was more strange than wonderful. The Toad, for example, was weird and kind of moralistic. But it's McKillip. So obviously I loved it.

Diana Green says

Reading McKillip's books has always been hit or miss for me. When she is good, she is truly brilliant, but sometimes I find her plots and characters too thin, lost in a stream of poetic language that fails to engage me. This mixed response was true of my reading *Harrowing the Dragon*, a collection of her short fiction.

While the writing itself is lovely, at times the dreamlike imagery feels too flimsy to carry a story. As a reader I need more grounding, something to sink my teeth into. A prime example of this is the opening story, *Harrowing the Dragon of Hoarsbreath*, which succeeded in transporting me to a unique place but had a plot that wandered pointlessly and in the end proved sadly frustrating.

Lady of Skulls started with a great concept but would have been stronger with characters of greater substance who were allowed time to develop and interact more. The *Snow Queen* did better in that regard and therefore felt less wispy. I thoroughly enjoyed McKillip's unique spin on that familiar tale.

Finally, Voyage into the Heart showcased McKillip doing what she does best, bringing to life an archetypal story, conveying magic and heart-wrenching beauty as if she were born to it.

There were a number of other pieces in this collection, but mostly they ranged from pleasant to meh, leaving me ambivalent about reading more of McKillip's short fiction.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Harrowing the Dragon is a lyrically written, fantastical collection of fantasy short stories by Patricia McKillip, one of my favorite authors. Not every story in it was a winner for me, but there are some real gems here.

I'm just going to do some drive-by shootings of ratings and my opinions on the fifteen stories in this collection:

"The Harrowing of the Dragon of Hoarsbreath": 3.5 stars. Bothering a dragon can backfire on you. Who knew? It's a moody and atmospheric story, but the ending felt a little flat.

"A Matter of Music": 5 stars. The adventures of a magical bard. It's a character type that I've met before in McKillip's stories, but this story was really well done, both imaginative and surprising.

"A Troll and Two Roses": 4 stars. Sometimes trolls just want a little love. Sweet and humorous.

"Baba Yaga and the Sorceror's Son": 3 stars. More humor, of the Russian folk tale variety. Mildly amusing.

"The Fellowship of the Dragon": 3.5 stars. Another one that felt unfinished, but it had kind of a cool group of female adventurers, off to rescue a guy from a dragon. Some interesting twists.

"Lady of the Skulls": 4 stars. A lady in a tower is surrounded by magical treasures. Pick the most valuable one and you get them all. Pick wrong and you die a horrible death.

"The Snow Queen": 5 stars. In this creative retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," Kay and Gerda are a young married couple with some relationship issues, and the snow queen is a femme fatale who seduces Kay away from Gerda, in a city encased by winter. Gerda, initially devastated, gradually finds herself. I loved this one.

"Ash, Wood, Fire": 1.5 stars. Short and incomprehensible.

"The Stranger": 4 stars. A stranger comes to an island, creates magical dragons who ravage the island, and demands a hefty price from the villagers to make them go away, in sort of a one-man Mafia act. Intriguing!

"Transmutations": 2.5 stars. I'm still not sure what the point was here.

"The Lion and the Lark": 4.5 stars. An interesting mix of *Beauty and the Beast* and a couple of other fairy tales. A beautiful but spoiled princess ("She doesn't listen very well") does her best to steal the guy. This was a delightful story!

"The Witches of Junket": 3 stars. Apparently it's a good thing that we have witch covens around to keep us safe from ancient menaces.

"Star-Crossed": 2.5 stars. This is a straightforward spin-off of Romeo and Juliet. It picks up right where Shakespeare's play ends, as the town tries to figure out what happened to Romeo, Juliet and Paris, and why. I'm really not sure what the point of this one was either. It wasn't particularly interesting.

"Voyage into the Heart": 3.5 stars. A prince and his mage use a virgin to capture a unicorn, with some unexpected results. This one *was* interesting.

"Toad": 3.5 stars. This retelling examines the "Princess and the Frog" fairy tale. We get it, the girl was a jerk. The ending was a little too ambiguous for me.

It all averages out to 3.6 stars (I actually ran the math), so I'll round up. As always, McKillip's writing is poetic and lovely. If you like lyrically written fairy tale retellings and aren't averse to some ambiguity, this collection should appeal to you.

Wealhtheow says

A collection of fantasy short stories. "Harrowing the Dragon" is a dreamy story about a young man who

seeks to free his town from eternal winter. But perhaps the town does not wish to be free. Probably the weakest story, "A Matter of Music" feels like a novel crammed into a short story. A young musician gets involved in a generations-long conflict that is mirrored in the conflict between her friend and his half-blood wife. I think my favorite is "A Troll and Two Roses," in which a lazy troll grows enamored of a magical white rose and ventures out of his bridge to get it. Thereupon he fights a prince, argues with a princess, and defeats a sorcerer. McKillip has always been interested in her own twisting retellings of fairy tales, and each of these stories is an odd reflection of a classic.
