

First Opinion: The Iron Chains of Destiny

McKinley, Robin. *Chalice*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2008.

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The Chalice stands waiting at the threshold for the first sight of the land's new Master. Sent away to be a Fire Priest as a boy, the Fire Master is a distant, ambiguous figure. It is unclear whether he can be drawn back from the brink and ever again be truly human; it is unclear if anyone can undo the ravages of the previous Master. Yet, without a Master, the land will destroy itself, and the demesne be torn apart by fire, flood, and earth tremors. To succeed, a Master needs a strong Chalice, and this one is young and untrained, a hurried replacement for the Chalice before who died with her Master and left no apprentice.

Thus opens *Chalice*, a tale of growth into power. *Chalice* is a bildungsroman that follows Mirasol, a peasant with only her woodright and her talent with bees to commend her as she explores the powers she has acquired when the land chose her as Chalice, bearer of the cup and mixer of the ritual drinks that bind the land. Mirasol is not in herself terribly interesting: she is in her twenties, has a limited world view, and is motivated mostly by her sense of what the land wants; her tale is one of confusion. Lacking the knowledge that would have been hers had she been properly apprenticed, Mirasol muddles through the ritual and political landmines in her path. Mirasol's confusion and working out of her problems is the reader's guide to this world, but it is a very limited guide. Mirasol—a peasant—has never left the land, and, as Chalice, she is the only one of a Master's circle who can never cross the demesne's borders. The result is a claustrophobic tale, rendered more so in the structures of the world as it is communicated to us.

The world Mirasol lives in is not only patriarchal and feudal but is also mandated by the morality of the land itself. The land demands a Master with bond to it. If the Master is not someone of the right blood family, the land sorrows and breaks. If the Master does not care, the land sorrows and breaks. The feudal structures depicted in this novel cannot be questioned by any of the protagonists because those structures are knitted into the land itself. There is a hint that the land was not even there before the familial and feudal structure was negotiated, or that it was too turbulent to be settled (we may even be in the first of a sequence of science fiction novels, and not, as we assume, in a fantasy novel—why is the corn king structure so necessary? What was there before the demesne?).

Mirasol's telling of this world is limited by her own restricted worldview and by the requirements that the structures of the world cannot be questioned. As narrator of the story, she is thus limited in what she can discuss, consider, or even think: in the tradition

of many fantasies Mirasol retreats to old books and old knowledge, with the implication that there is no new knowledge. Still, she knows herself to be something new—a Chalice whose power is in honey rather than wine or water. The result is that Mirasol's thoughts spin in circles. It is realistic, but means that McKinley tells us many things three, four, and five times, giving not more perspective but instead intensifying the feeling of claustrophobia and limitations.

As the novel proceeds, Mirasol grows to know herself and her domain intensely. With this knowledge comes the strong sense of internal morality that distinguishes the fantasy world from a science fiction world with similar trappings. *Chalice* takes literally the notion of having the king bound to the land, and the consequence of that reification is that we are never in doubt of the outcome, either on the larger scale of the political crisis at the heart of the tale, or at the more personal level of Mirasol's future. *Chalice* is a YA novel, not because of the age of the characters (in their early twenties), but because it holds firmly to the value structures of the current YA market: it is a career novel in which people are not trained but find their inner talent in a magical form of *Pop Idol*; it is a story in which young love is everlasting love; it is a settling-down novel in which all true values are found at home, and coming home is depicted as far more satisfying than striding out in the world. *Chalice* is a lovely read, but, for all the delight in the main character's independence and intelligence, this is a fundamentally conservative fantasy where destiny and blood win, and only the wicked are able to challenge the inevitability of the narrated world.

About the Author

Farah Mendlesohn is Reader in Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature at Middlesex University, London. She edited the journal *Foundation* for six years and has published on a number of different writers. Her most recent book is the critically acclaimed *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. In 2009 she will publish *The Inter-Galactic Playground: Children, Teens and Science Fiction*, and a collection of essays, *On Joanna Russ*.

Second Reaction: A Classic Young Adult Fantasy Piece

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Louise Rosenblatt claims that literature allows the reader to connect with the text when it symbolically allows the reader “to live through some moment of feeling, to enter into some human personality, or to participate imaginatively in some situation or event” (62-63). This “live circuit” (66) makes McKinley’s *Chalice* a success. *Chalice* is a classic young adult fantasy novel boasting sacred lands, an elemental Priest of Fire, and magical honeybees. McKinley’s protagonist is a typical coming-of-age heroine who has lost her parents and must struggle with both internal and external obstacles in her “search not only for identity but [also for] respect” (Christenbury 154). In this characteristic fantasy piece, Mirasole must see beyond her own trials to save the people in the age-old battle of good versus evil.

Robin McKinley is not new to the literary world or the fantasy genre. She is well known for her retellings of *Cinderella (Spindles’s End)* and *Beauty and the Beast*. She also holds a Newbery Medal for her novel, *The Hero and the Crown*, and a Newbery Honor for *The Blue Sword*.

As the novel opens, the new Chalice, Mirasole, is preparing to meet the new Master of Willowsland. It has been seven years since the new Master was sent to the Elemental priests of Fire, but after the unexpected death of his brother, he has been called back to try to help the suffering demesne recover from its decaying state. No one is more anxious than Chalice to see this returning brother come home. When the new Master arrives, she examines his face for any glimpse of the boy he once was:

The third face was black, as black as the coal-colored horse that drew the black coach, and its—his—eyes were red, flickering like fire around the black pupils. She recognized nothing in that face from her memories of the younger brother of the dead Master. She looked at him steadily, willing herself to see something—anything—that she could welcome as Master, and in the final seconds it took him to climb the last step, she saw what she needed to see: comprehension. He knew her for Chalice and knew she was there to welcome him, because he came as Master. (8-9)

Unlike Chalice, the people of Willowsland fear that this new Master has been gone too long, allowing the evil Overlord to build plans to use their insecurity as he seeks to replace

the new Master with his own pawn. Despite her own youth and inexperience, Chalice realizes that she is the only one who can protect the Master and save her people:

These were her people now, as much as they were the Master's. She saw into the crowd without meaning to, looked into their faces—realizing how many of them she now knew as individuals—how many she could put names to, and say what they did, how many children they had, where they lived. And—especially today, the day of the *faenorn*—they were expecting her, relying on her, to hold the demesne together. (236)

McKinley has done a fine job of capturing our imaginations and allowing us to place the necessary faith in young Chalice's ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. What's most refreshing about this novel is McKinley's entrancing style and plot. We share in Chalice's journey from start to finish; we hope with Chalice as she nervously awaits the new Master; we empathize with her desire to save her suffering land and people; and we revel in her final victory over the corrupt Overlord.

Although all audiences will enjoy this easily read fantasy, teens will especially identify with Chalice's self-quest as she grapples with her own identity. Chalice would fare well in a unit on courage or bravery. McKinley's female hero could be used to compare and contrast heroes of various genders, generations, ages, and races.

Having taught senior English British literature, I think the novel may be an ideal fit with various medieval pieces, such as the King Arthur tales. Students could analyze the roles and responsibilities of McKinley's chalice, master, and inner circle in relation to that of England's medieval caste system. Lower or upper level students could also examine McKinley's language and rich descriptions. McKinley beautifully introduces the land, the scenery, and the essence of Mirasole's honeybees. Students could use McKinley's example in creating their own descriptions.

When using the text with any class, a great resource is Robin McKinley's home page, <<http://www.robinmckinley.com>>, where she has sections devoted to books, frequently asked questions, her biography, and a blogspot. Students will enjoy getting to know more about the author, what authors have influenced her, the inspiration for her book ideas, and much more. I also recommend the site for teachers interested in finding out more about *Chalice* and McKinley's other texts.

Works Cited

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