

“Compelling Stories in a Potential Masterpiece”

Locus Looks at Books: Gary K. Wolfe reviews *SHADOWBRIDGE*

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“You imagine that stories protect you,” a serpent warns Leodora, the heroine of Gregory Frost’s rather stunning new fantasy novel *Shadowbridge*, and we’re immediately put in mind of Scheherazade and the whole long tradition of tales-as-commodities and the even broader tradition of art as a survival skill. But by this point, late in the novel, it’s already clear to us that stories are Leodora’s stock in trade, and that they’re Frost’s as well. Set in an ocean-covered world in which societies thrive on a complex system of elaborate inhabited bridges—think of a Ponte Vecchio the size of the world—the novel also achieves a kind of Florentine grace and balance rare in modern fantasy, interpolating tales within tales, playing ingenious games with point of view, and offering more than a few passages of surpassingly lovely prose. It’s a far more important novel than its almost generic-sounding title would suggest, or even than its opening chapter promises. There we first meet Leodora, shadow puppeteer and storyteller, as she climbs high on one of *Shadowbridge*’s “spans,” unfurling her gorgeous red hair from her hood, glowing “like a burnished goddess” in the sunset. For a moment, we wonder if, like so many fantasies, this is going to be yet another pageant in which the plot is merely a lattice on which to hang setpieces. But if the opening glamour-puss shot of Leodora is a bit of a cliché, it’s a minor one at worst, and it’s about the last one Frost commits. For all its painterly beauty, **Shadowbridge** is a tough-minded novel that confronts some disturbing issues, and that is remarkably efficient in the telling; even though it’s only the first half of a duology to be completed next spring, it gets as much done in barely over 250 pages as many other fantasies do in big-brown-bag trilogies.

And in a way, **Shadowbridge** is a kind of trilogy, with its narrative divided into three distinct parts. First we learn of Leodora’s own childhood as an orphan raised in a family of fishmongers, who learns that her long-gone father was a legendary storyteller and puppeteer named Bardsham and that her mother was widely regarded as a witch. Because of her parentage, she’s barely considered marriageable, and when her boorish uncle betroths her to a hulking village idiot to form a family alliance, she decides to flee, seeking the protection of the impresario Soter, who had been her father’s manager and who teaches her the skills of shadow-puppetry and storytelling. The second part of the novel—which we are reminded is the version of the tale which Leodora later tells—concerns Diverus, orphaned at 14 and terrified into muteness when he learns his father is gone, who after falling into the hands of Mother Kestrel is chained to a remote bridge outcropping called the Dragon Bowl, supposedly

sometimes visited by the gods. Believing Diverus has been touched by the gods, Mother Kestrel eventually sells him to Bogrevil, who runs a rather terrifying brothel-like establishment where demons called “afrits” somehow extract the essences of young boys, which in turn are smoked by the dissolute clients through hookahs. Diverus is able to save himself only by discovering a genius for playing any musical instrument, a talent which may have been given to him by the gods while he was in the Dragon Bowl. Eventually, Leodora shows up at the establishment, in need of a musician to assist her now-famous storytelling act, and the two of them set off together, accompanied by Soter and an elf named Grumelpyn, leading to the third part of the novel.

As compelling as the stories of Leodora and Diverus may be—not to mention the various interpolated myths and tales involving heroes and creation legends—**Shadowbridge** is far from complete, and a fair portion of the third section, which takes them eventually to a ruined city called Colemaigne, is devoted to setting up mysteries that will no doubt be addressed in the second volume. Cryptic references to Agents, to Edgeworld, to a mysterious Library, are accompanied by portents such as Leodora’s realization that “she doubted she knew anything about the truth of the origins of Shadowbridge and suspected nobody else did, either.” Frost adds his own mysteries through evocative place names that sometimes seem Indian (such as Vijnagar, Leodora’s home village), sometimes Chinese or Japanese, sometimes European. He’s got a lot of explaining to do, and it’s not likely that anyone who reads this compelling and original novel will fail to follow it into the second volume. Frost could be on his way toward a masterpiece.