

Shadowbridge by Gregory Frost

Review by Mel Jacob

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In Gregory Frost's new fantasy novel *Shadowbridge*, Leodora, a shadow puppeteer, treads the same path as her parents. She doesn't know they died horrible deaths on a distant bridge span, but Soter, the drunken old man who saved Leodora, tells her nothing of their fate. Given a home by her grandfather, bad luck dogs the family, and her fishmonger uncle assigns her the most menial tasks.

Leodora's world consists of immense bridges linking bits of land. Most people live in structures built on or beneath the spans. The novel opens with Leodora high atop the Ningle Span where she encounters the god Shumyzin. She tells his story, and, in return, he warns her about the future, but falls mute before finishing.

Much of the novel involves flashbacks including a description of Leodora's early life until she becomes an outcast for violating the taboos of her island home. She must escape or face defilement and execution.

Favored by the gods, Leodora and Soter flee her abusive uncle, and she embarks on a career as the puppeteer Jax. The citizens of the spans relegate women to subservient roles, so Leodora pretends to be a man. On the spans she finds acceptance as Jax, but also danger. Others hunt the new master storyteller.

Soter acts as manager for Leodora, and she also acquires a master musician who began life as an idiot, but gained strange powers when touched by a god. The musician's life also appears as a flashback. Extraordinary creatures and avatars that only she and the musician see offer diversions, stories, and warnings.

Many people fear the sea and its creatures, but the sea and the stories call to Leodora. In *Shadowbridge*, capricious gods confer gifts with both good and bad consequences. The musician gains the ability to play any instrument and an awareness of life and what it means he never had before. His new understanding also brings unaccustomed pain.

Best known for his short stories, Frost has created a colorful world of islands and bridge spans. He develops his characters through the stories Leodora collects. Much of the writing is reminiscent of British novelist Chris Wooding with literate language, colorful description, and Asian influences.

Planned as two novels, the first, *Shadowbridge*, ends abruptly with a cliffhanger; but there's no resolution. Some readers may be disappointed, but most will eagerly await the continuation of Leodora's story in the summer of 2008.

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