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Winter 12-15-2021

## Half Sick of Shadows, by Laura Sebastian. Reviewed by McKenzie Peck

McKenzie Peck

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### Recommended Citation

Peck, McKenzie, "Half Sick of Shadows, by Laura Sebastian. Reviewed by McKenzie Peck" (2021).

*Mythprint Book Reviews*. 4.

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Sebastian, Laura. *Half Sick of Shadows*. Ace, 2021. pp. 443. \$17.94. Reviewed by McKenzie Deck.

“I will die drowning; it has always been known” (1).

From the first sentence of *Half Sick of Shadows*, *New York Times* Bestselling Author, Laura Sebastian captures her readers, never to let go. Lovers of medieval Knights of the Round Table lore, to Victorian era Tennyson poetry, to modern retellings of Arthurian legend may all find something to enjoy in this story of Elaine Astolat, Lady of Shal-lot. Any reader of Arthurian myth knows Elaine’s tragic death, but what is her story before that?

In each chapter of *Half Sick of Shadows*, Sebastian weaves together the present, the past, and the future of Elaine’s life. In the past, Elaine is living in Camelot as a young child. Her mother is controlling, having been taught for generations to hide her own magical powers, forcing Elaine to do the same, driving them both into madness. Elaine is living as a sheltered outsider, ridiculed and bullied by Morgause and her entourage because of her mother’s madness. In the past, Elaine is leaving Camelot and her mother behind, riding forward to Avalon with her best friend Morgana by her side.

Now, ten years later, Elaine is living in Avalon, learning how to scry with her loom, Nimue as her guide. Arthur and Gwen are already lovers. Morgana is practicing her magic. Lancelot is running carefree, catching Elaine's eye. All five are best friends, inseparable, seemingly invulnerable against their impending destinies. Still, Elaine keeps weaving, keeps seeing visions, keeps trying to prevent the future.



In the future, some events are clear but many of Elaine's and her friends' fates "come[...] down to a choice that hasn't been made yet, a choice the future of [their] world hangs on. One choice, from one girl" (8). In the future, Morgana will always betray Arthur. Lancelot and Gwen will always be disloyal. Arthur will always fall. Elaine will always die drowning. But, what choices will they have to make along the way? And, what happens after their destinies?

In the present, Elaine and her friends meet their destinies, riding back to Camelot, holding tightly to the repeated refrain, "Arthur needs us" (66).

Although pieces of Elaine's and her friends' stories will be familiar to many readers, Sebastian's version fills in the gaps of their childhood and teenage years, building characters and friendships, victories and losses, lives and deaths. Sebastian skillfully expands on absent details from medieval and Victorian Arthuriana while staying true to the Arthurian world and lore readers already adore.

In early Arthuriana, Sir Thomas Malory treats Elaine, the Fair Maid of Astolat, as but a pining damsel, dying for her love of Lancelot. Similarly, Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem "The Lady of Shalott" (1832) treats Elaine as but a cursed, forgotten face in a tower, weaving steadily, sighing that she is "half sick of shadows." Sebastian, on the other hand, builds upon existing Arthurian myth to give Elaine a backstory, a life, and agency. Readers should delight in an Elaine who no longer lives in the shadows, watching the world float by her -- she is now orchestrating her own future as well as the future of Arthur and Camelot.

In addition to Elaine, Sebastian presents Morgana and Gwen as strong female characters. In Sebastian's world, the trio of females each get opportunities to make destiny-changing choices, which at times relegate Arthur and Lancelot to the more submissive, follower roles traditionally given to women in Arthurian legend. Sebastian's Elaine, Morgana, and Gwen are strong, powerful, and bold. They know their own minds and seek opportunities to lead Camelot into a better future. For, as Nimue counsels Elaine, "... you were not raised to be safe, you were raised to be heroes" (9).

Sebastian's focus on female characters and developing their stories places her novel within the current trend of female authors whose writing focuses on the furthering the female perspective in classical literature, including Madeline Miller (*Circe* 2018), Natalie Haynes (*A Thousand Ships* 2019), Jennifer Saint (*Ariadne* 2021), and more. Moreover, Sebastian's book, though shorter and more condensed, is reminiscent of the female-led *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) by Marion Zimmer Bradley.

*Half Sick of Shadows* has a casual, easy to read tone while remaining action-packed and stimulating. This style may best interest young adult readers; although, the desire to know more about underwritten characters like Elaine might entice any fan of Arthurian lore. Other readers that are interested in female-led stories, magic, fey, and visions may also find Sebastian's work entertaining. Readers should keep in mind that, although Arthur, Gwen, and other beloved characters are prominent in *Half Sick of Shadows*, the story itself does centralize around Elaine, her visions, and her suicide. Readers should not expect a full reimagining of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* or T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* where the ending is the demise of King Arthur.

Instead, the ending of *Half Sick of Shadows* echoes the first line: "Elaine Astolat, the Lady of Shalott, dies drowning. When she does, it is a choice" (420).

But, is that truly Elaine's ending?