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Book Review: *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide* by Justina Ireland

Phillip Fitzsimmons

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battle and flame, and one loud noise: Maeglin screaming as he falls from the precipice.) An epilogue, based on the poem “The Happy Mariners” and set on the shore of the Sea, for soloists and chorus with light orchestration, is musically the most effective thing in the opera.

Godfrey is a tonal composer in a neo-romantic idiom, prone to the employment of key motifs in his accompaniment, though not in the heavy-handed manner of Wagner. His vocal lines are less motivically structured and more chromatic as well as more meandering. The music’s function is to carry the story and not to convey pretty tunes; Godfrey avoids strophism even when the verse might suggest it, and the beauty of his work is of a more distant and ethereal kind.

In general, based on this excerpt it looks like an impressive project, possibly at a larger scale than it can digest artistically but containing attractive and effective things, a respectful and intelligent tribute to Tolkien.

Ireland, Justina. *Dread Nation*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018. pp. 455. \$11.79. and *Deathless Divide*, 2020. pp. 560. \$19.19. Reviewed by Phillip Fitzsimmons.

The books, *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide*, by Justina Ireland are the first two volumes of the *Dread Nation* series, an alternative history in which the American Civil War ended “when the dead rose up and started to walk on a battlefield in a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg.” (3) I, the reviewer, am not usually a fan of zombie stories, but I read *Dread Nation* because of my wife’s enthusiastic recommendation of the first book of the series. She said the author wrote like Mark Twain. My wife’s claim intrigued and led me to read two enjoyable books. The first-person narrative of 17-year-old Jane McKeene brings the character to life, with her lively, smart, and irreverent turns of phrase that are reminiscent of Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Unlike Huckleberry Finn, Justina Ireland’s narrative voice of Jane McKeene is a perfect creation of a young educated speaker who

uses vernacular English as she describes her story, first in *Dread Nation*, of being taken as a child slave from her mother and her home at Rose Hill Plantation to being a student at “Miss Preston’s School of Combat for Negro Girls” (9) outside of Baltimore. There, she excels in combat training, especially with using a scythe, is generally a solid student, but is weak in the study of etiquette. Being able to function in high society is necessary for Jane to be employed as a lady’s attendant upon graduating from school. She explains, “An Attendant’s job is simple: keep her charge from being killed by the dead, and her virtue from being compromised by potential suitors. It is a task easier said than done.” (10)

Jane McKeene works hard to achieve what she sees as the best of many bad choices in this alternative history in which she must become an attendant to have some protection from the undead, called shamblers, that threaten the entire United States. She is a compelling character that I rooted for as she makes comments in her narrative, such as the following:

About Katherine, another student at her school: “Girl would rat out Jesus to the Romans.” (96)

In another, she describes saving the guests at a high-society dinner party, where she is working as a server, and puts down a man as he is transforming into a shambler as they dine.

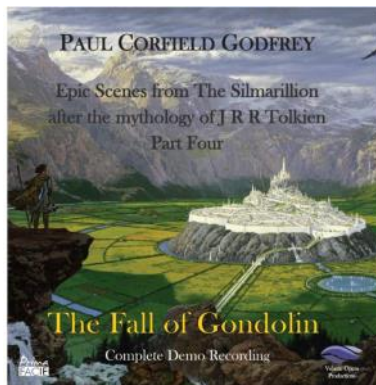
“Everyone’s eyes are upon me now, their faces twisted in disgust, as if killing a dinner guest, shambler or no, is a terrible faux pas.” (166)

Here is a conversation with The Duchess, a character she meets in Kansas, ““Look at you, with those pretty manners. Wherever did they find you?”

“At the junction of hard luck and bad times,” I answer. It’s something that my momma says.””

The aforementioned Katherine, who is a major character in the *Dread Nation* series, is also memorable. Jane describes this moment with Katherine, who says:

““I’m a lady, Jane. I would never turn my hand to violence; that is what my Attendant is for. Besides, as long as I am trapped in this godforsaken place, I will have to do all my dealings in the currency of besotted idiots. What would you have me to do, alienate the entire town?” ... She snaps open



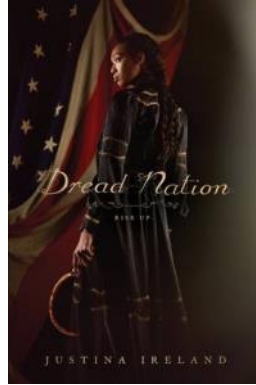
her parasol and gives me a haughty look over her shoulder. I can't decide if she's brilliant or utterly insane." (341)

My purpose here is to give a taste of the author's wit, dialogue, and creation of characters. These samples represent the uniform quality of the two books, which feature many well-developed characters and are enjoyable adventures.

Both volumes are reminiscent of the popular literature of the 19th Century. Chapters have titles such as "In Which I Am Born and Someone Tries to Murder Me", (1) "In Which I Attend a Rather Eventful Dinner", (152) and "In Which Some Time Passes and I Grow Restless". (272) Jane McKeene often refers to the contraband western serials that she sneaks into the school and reads. The reader will see that our heroine turns out to be featured in the type of adventure story that she loves to read. And, true to formula, she is intelligent, loyal, exceptionally talented, and her own worst enemy. Misfortune descends upon her from the time of the ill-fated dinner party on. She soon finds herself in Summerland, Kansas, where the trouble escalates.

Like with other great adventure stories, Jane McKeene learns about friendship and how to work with others as they all fight to survive in a world of shamblers and as they struggle with the evils of white privilege and bigotry. The author does not flinch nor show a rose-tinted vision of racism in the United States. Also, diversity and inclusion are shown with a spectrum of LGBTQ+ characters who are sympathetic, positively drawn, and central to the story. The LGBTQ+ characters occur mostly in volume two, *Deathless Divide*.

To wrap up this review, I really enjoyed and recommend *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide* from the *Dread Nation* series by Justina Ireland. I am looking forward to and will read the third installment when released. These books are good for middle-school, high school, and public libraries. They are good for colleges and universities with education programs. And, they are good for the general reader wanting to dive into a good new series. I recommend them as solid pieces of writing that are both contemporary and fine homages to the serial literature of the 19th Century. I recommend them because of their presentation and development of characters such as Jane McKeene, Katherine Deveraux, Jackson Keats, Big Sue, and



Daniel Redfern. Finally, I recommend the books because they provide compelling stories that continue in a satisfying progression from volume to volume. I expect the adventure to be as satisfying in volume three as it is in the first two books.

The volumes in the *Dread Nation* series, as an alternative history, are not an exact fit with the fantasy literature that we typically discuss in the Mythopoeic Society and that are reviewed in *Mythprint*; however, it is close enough for me, especially with the repeated appearance of a ghost in the books. Ireland is no stranger to fantasy literature. She has written the young-adult fantasy novels *Promise of Shadows* (2014) and *Vengeance Bound* (2013). Between her earlier fantasy novels and the *Dread Nation* series, Ireland is an author we should watch for in the future, and who I think many members of the Mythopoeic Society will enjoy.

SEBASTIAN, LAURA. *Half Sick of Shadows*. Ace, 2021. pp. 443. \$17.94. Reviewed by McKenzie Peck.

"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 Shalot. 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.