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Winter 12-15-2023

Dark Moon Shallow Sea (The Gods of Night and Day Series, vol. 1) by David R. Slayton

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Recommended Citation

Fitzsimmons, Phillip, "Dark Moon Shallow Sea (The Gods of Night and Day Series, vol. 1) by David R. Slayton" (2023). *Faculty Articles & Research*. 63.
https://dc.swosu.edu/libraries_articles/63

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David R. Slayton. *Dark Moon Shallow Sea*. The Gods of Night and Day Series, vol 1, Blackstone Publishing, 2023. 350pp. \$25.99. Reviewed by Phillip Fitzsimmons.

After the success of his urban fantasy Adam Binder series, author David R. Slayton capably tackles another subgenre, the epic fantasy, in his new novel *Dark Moon Shallow Sea* (DMSS). Once again, Slayton does not disappoint and again shows his trademarks of intricate world-building and relatable characters.

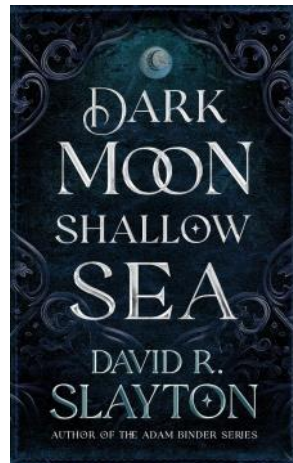
DMSS, released on October 21, 2023, is volume one of *The Gods of Night and Day* series and is as different from the *Adam Binder* books as – to make a bad pun on the series' name – night and day. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the new book greatly, which is saying a lot as I read the *Adam Binder* trilogy four times this year. As for DMSS, I have read it in print once and listened to the audiobook twice in the month since its release. Though I am an avid re-reader of books, I haven't done repeated readings of an author's works in such a short turnaround time since I was in middle and high school and doing the same thing with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Both authors draw me in with their well-crafted writing, compelling stories, likable heroes, and themes that provide food for thought. With that written, I must emphasize that *Dark Moon Shallow Sea* is not a *Lord of the Rings* rip-off in any way.

In *Dark Moon Shallow Sea* two sentences on page three sets the stage of the novel.

"The Knights of Hyperion, god of the sun, had murdered Phoebe, goddess of the moon. With her had gone the tides and the path to the Underworld." (3)

The novel initially follows the character Raef on a thieving adventure ten years after the deicide. Raef was originally a child novice of the goddess, but he escaped the scriptorium of Phoebe's tower while it was being razed. The environmental consequences of the murder of moon-goddess Phoebe is that the physical moon is dark, the seas have withdrawn, and the Grief has appeared to be an increasing menace to all living creatures. The Grief is a phenomenon in which the spirits of the dead accumulate wherever there is darkness. The spirits attack people whenever even a drop of blood flows from a wound. The spirits are hungry for any blood because it temporarily enlivens and prevents them from fading away completely. Once they attack, they drain and consume all of a person or animal's blood. The Grief appears because the goddess Phoebe is no longer available to ferry the dead to the afterlife. The spirits of the dead accumulate year by year and are an increasing threat; also, fewer babies are born.

In the world of the novel, the sun-worshipping Knights of Hyperion shoot fire from their swords and have hounds that burst into flame upon command, though not harming themselves. It is a world in which demons play a role in the conflict between the two religious traditions of the sun and moon. The demons perform magic such as the possession and control of swaths of large vines used as a weapon to capture people to drink their life fluids much as the spirits of the Grief do. I will not describe the other magic and technology used in the novel. The examples thus far are intended to give the reader a taste of the world of DMSS with a minimum of spoilers.



Part of the novel's depth comes from Slayton's portrayal of the villains' evil not being as simple and straightforward as the reader is initially led to expect. In fact, the Facebook phrase "It's complicated" could be used to describe many of the reoccurring themes throughout all four of Slayton's books. He shows the unfairness of life for his young heroes, leading to uncomfortable decisions and to no-win resolutions. For example, one betrayal in *DMSS* results in the sorrowful observation of a priest: "...It is a mortal wound when your faith breaks, my boy." (301) The book shows betrayal from within the religious institutions, between friends, and among family members. In short, Slayton dramatizes how messy life is for everyone, including for his good-hearted and well-meaning heroes. Yet, the heroes persist and work to build positive and fruitful relationships among religious colleagues, friends, and family, despite everyone's earlier poor decisions, conflicts, treacheries, and sometimes contempt from others.

Slayton's motivation for creating his brand of fiction is found in a quote on his Goodreads author's page:

"I couldn't find the books I wanted to read, namely fantasy novels with a gay main character that weren't about being gay or without a lot of tragedy around being gay. So I write those."
<https://www.goodreads.com/questions/1872334-how-do-you-get-inspired-to-write>

To my mind he succeeds in his goal. His novels provide compelling fantasy stories in which romance is present but secondary to the primary adventures of the tales. The author also successfully populates the story with women, people of color, and characters who are gay in leadership roles.

I expect that Slayton's work, especially *DMSS*, will appeal to many members of the Mythopoeic Society because he is producing mythopoeic literature as defined on the Mythsoc website:

"Mythopoeic literature creates a new and transformative mythology, or incorporates and transforms existing mythological material. ...The mythological elements must be of sufficient importance in the work to influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters, and must reflect and support the author's underlying themes. This type of work, at its best, should also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development." <https://mythsoc.org/about.htm>

DMSS fulfills that definition by presenting a Greco-Roman inspired world, featuring a clash between worshipers of the sun and of the moon,* and focusing on the heroes' spiritual struggles as dissension rages among and between the religious groups. Slayton's descriptions of the many conflicts in *DMSS* likewise lend themselves to be pondered by the reader for his or her own development, as called for in the definition above of mythopoeic literature.

Yet, there is more. *DMSS* concludes with a satisfying eucatastrophe, the word coined by Tolkien and written about in "On Fairy-Stories." The word is used to describe the place in the story in which the protagonist is almost defeated but then emerges victorious through a sudden turn of events. (380-381) Again, as pointed out earlier in this review, I am not suggesting that the works of Slayton and Tolkien are alike. They are not. I am pointing out here that Slayton's work is strong and includes elements that both make it mythopoeic literature and that are in the books Mythsoc members already love.

In short, I like and recommend *Dark Moon Shallow Sea* by David R. Slayton. The book would sit comfortably on the shelf with *The King Must Die* by Mary Renault, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* by Scott Lynch, and *The Goblin Emperor* by Katherine Addison.

The book is appropriate for YA and adult readers. It should be considered for all public libraries, most high school libraries, and college libraries that support teacher education programs.

This thought-provoking book can be used in classrooms or book discussions to explore ideas about fantasy literature, religions and faith, LGBTQ issues, or the messy nature of life and of human relationships. Finally, and most importantly, it is a good book for pleasure reading for lovers of fantasy and especially of mythopoeic literature.

Works Cited

*For more on the mythological elements of sun worshipers supplanting an earlier moon worshipping tradition see *Goddesses: Mysteries of the Feminine Divine* by Joseph Campbell and edited by Safron Rossi 2013 a volume in *The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell* series.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Tales From The Perilous Realm*, HarperCollins e-books, 2008, pp. 380-381.