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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Kay, Guy Gavriel. *Tigana*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

It is perhaps from his work with Christopher Tolkien in preparing *The Silmarillion* for publication that Guy Gavriel Kay is best known to students of the Inklings, although his own fantasy trilogy, *The Fionavar Tapestry*, has won praise in many quarters, and gained a following. As one could expect of someone so long immersed in the study and appreciation of Tolkien's monumental creative genius, Kay's personal mythopoeic constructions are more than a little influenced by Tolkieniana, and the basic elements of his plot — cosmic alignments of good against evil, immensely powerful, sorcerous Dark Lords, redeemer-figures who prevail over immense odds in the nick of time — will seem familiar to most fantasy readers. And yet, even in *The Fionavar Tapestry*, which most obviously bears the stamp of Tolkien's influence, there are many aspects of Kay's characterizations and plot developments which suggest that he is inspired by a philosophy and sensibility that are, in essence Un-Tolkienian. His new fantasy, *Tigana* (RoC, 1990), distances itself even further from Tolkien's model, giving Kay's distinctive voice a chance to express itself more purely, although the links with the Tolkienian manner are not served completely, leading, at times, to a certain confusion of feeling and expectation on the reader's part.

Tigana is not, as its publishers of course describe it, an "epic": it does not have the simple, powerfully maintained thrust of that genre. It is built, rather, like a sprawling Victorian novel, episodic, replete with major and minor characters, each of them carefully presented to us in a self-contained tableau. The variety of characters and subplots is, in fact, not entirely brought under control here by the author. For at least the first two-thirds of the novel, despite its wealth of incident and the great force of some individual scenes, the story meanders on somewhat uncertainly. It is only in the last hundred and twenty pages that the narrative takes on real urgency, and the tensions of the plot come to an extremely memorable, if not entirely satisfactory, resolution.

The Peninsula of the Palm, where the story is set, suggests Renaissance Italy with its bickering, vain city-states, although its religion of the Triad has a modern Neo-Pagan flavor. It is an urban, mercantile world, its inhabitants mostly given over to mundane concerns, to political intrigue and commercial feuds. No elves or dwarves here: the primeval wonders of a pre-human time appear only in myth and vision, not in ordinary waking life. Yet it does have one ingredient that links it to classical high-fantasy settings: magic. Not only does magic work in this subcreation, but it has been used by political powers to conquer and subdue new territories. At the time of the story the western and eastern halves of the Palm are controlled respectively by Ygrath and Barbador, two great

empires overseas. The men who have won these new colonies for their motherlands are both sorcerors, though there the resemblance between them ends. Alberico, representing the Emperor in Barbador, is greedy, petty and cruel, brutally exploiting the lands under his care as he constantly looks homeward and plots to become Emperor himself. His mortal enemy, Brandin, King of Ygrath, has come in his own person to rule over his colonies, which he had originally conquered as a domain for his beloved son, Stevan. After Stevan is killed during the conquest of the province of Tigana, Brandin, in the depth of his grief, curses Tigana to become nameless and fade from the memory of men. Although native Tiganese born before the cursing can still speak of their province and name it, all others (excepts wizards, who are immune to the spell) are magically prevented from remembering or hearing its name. Since the spell will hold as long as he lives, Brandin extends his lifespan so he can outlive all the remaining Tiganese and thus insure the extinction of Tigana in human consciousness.

The Prince of Tigana's son, Alessan, has survived and drawn to himself a small band of other Tiganese. Disguised as traveling musicians, they journey all over the Palm, engaging in what we would in modern language call terrorist activities, aiming at the eventual expulsion of both Brandin and Alberico from the Palm. Unknown to them, a Tiganese woman, Dianora (the sister of Baerd, Alessan's closest friend) has gained access to Brandin as his concubine, intending to kill him and break the spell upon her province. Yet as she comes to know him better she discovers that he is an emotionally complex but essentially noble man, whose great hate has grown out of the wounding of an intense love. She falls in love with him herself, and guiltily postpones her revenge.

One of the story's main weaknesses is that we, the readers, are never given a truly compelling reason — whether moral or aesthetic — to side with the Tiganese rebels. Yes, there is a kind of existential horror in the thought of irrevocably losing one's cultural identity — and the theme does indeed have a particular applicability today, when powerless minority cultures such as Celts, native American, Pacific islanders and the like are watching their heritage be consigned to oblivion by the language policies of the states that rule them. But before we can truly sympathize with such a plight, we must be made viscerally aware of what is being lost. And Kay never really brings Tigana to life for us. The Tiganese characters are always gushing with pride and nostalgia, but we are never made to share the unique memories that would have fueled such sentiments. When Aragorn (who is — at least in some

(Continued on page 58)

active. The Balrog definitely means business and it seems quite hopeless for Glorfindel to do anything to harm this monster. The principals are at one side of the frame helping to portray their precarious position and lending to a sense of action 'on the edge!'

December is entitled "Minas Tirith." As many people commented at this year's Mythopoeic Conference, it is done in lighting that is very reminiscent of Maxfield Parrish and is quite beautiful. A portion of the city is shown, apparently from a northern viewpoint, with the viewer situated someplace between the Tower and the Pier that thrusts out over the gate, giving a profile-like view of the city. The main gate is not visible at all. I think the illustration is to show the top five tiers of the city. The bottom part fading off into clouds and the very top part of the Tower and the Pier are showing the first light of dawn. This viewpoint avoids having to compare the city with Mount Mindolluin. I think this is quite a beautiful picture but the city itself does not compare with Nasmith's masterpiece from his 1990 calendar. The effect of color in this illustration I think is better though. The more dramatic colors and strong contrast in value may be easier to capture in this print medium than colors grayed to portray distance.

Howe crops his subject so as to focus attention and avoid comparisons with the surrounding landscape or action. This allows him to create dramatic and I think effective scenes. Overall, I'm going to find this an enjoyable calendar to watch through the year except for the month of January. Those foothills of potatoes are going to be quite difficult to 'swallow.' The other complaint I have with this calendar may resolve itself with time and that is of the apparently computer-generated graphic borders around the calendar portion of the page. They are uniformly built on rather simple designs, black over a primary color, which changes from month to month, and to me, detract from the illustrations. I think they're supposed to represent a simplified version of Celtic designs.

I notice in my own response to the calendars over time and that of other viewers a lack of sympathy for the artist's use of their own imagination. Perhaps I hang too much on their portrayals as illustrations. If I go with the feeling, scenes like "Glorfindel and the Balrog" or even Garland's mountain top Smaug (1989) work just fine.

[Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Vol. III, 117. 1966, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, ISBN 0-395-19395-B.]

— Bruce Leonard



Tales Newly Told (continued from page 50)

measure—the model for Alessan) stands against the Dark Lord, we know intimately — because Tolkien has done a splendid job of showing us — just what he stands for: the pristine beauty of the Elvish and Numenorean heritage of the early ages of Middle-earth. Alessan has nothing as poetically convincing as this at his back, and we remain

free to question the moral legitimacy of his actions, and even to feel greater sympathy for Brandin as the invader comes to truly love his adopted land.

Also frustrating is Kay's tendency to present us with unusual and fascinating characters, and then do very little with them. Alienor, for instance, an aristocratic woman who aids the rebels, is given an intriguing persona, darkened by nymphomania and sado-masochism, which begs to be developed further and put to better narrative use, but her role in the plot is allowed to fizzle out inconclusively. And Marius, the crippled King of Quileia, another larger-than-life figure, who has, in the past, with the aid of Alessan and Baerd, toppled an oppressive matriarchy, demands to have his story told in full, rather than dismissed with a few flashbacks (or could this be Kay's next project?).

Of all the novel's vividly drawn characters Brandin is unquestionably the most memorable, and because his heroic traits are as impressive as his evil ones, his tragic destiny affects us all the more. It is the uncompromising sense of tragedy that, I think, most differentiates Kay from Tolkien (despite the presence of tragic figures in Tolkien's work, like Túrin). Kay has already shown a concern for the theme of the sacrifice, the victim who comes to a tragic end so that others may live — Kevin Laine in *The Fionavar Tapestry* comes to mind. Of course, Tolkien's Frodo himself incarnated this theme when he told Sam: "It must often be so... when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them"; and Dianora echoes him when she thinks that "Hers was not a life meant to be made whole." Yet Frodo, even if he loses the life he once had, does reap some form of spiritual and emotional reward for his suffering. For Dianora, "that grace could not come by so easy'y," and the destruction she and Brandin must suffer is devastatingly final, despite the suggestion that they may live again happily in Fionavar. Kay's universe, in contrast to Tolkien's, is fundamentally non-Christian: there can be no eucatastrophe. The only metaphysical premise governing the moral world here is the Law of Return: the sins of Brandin's past find him out and destroy him, before his evident transformation through love can lead him to undo them. The power of the tragedy, for the reader, casts a pall over the "happy" ending granted to the rebels.

Yet Kay's skill as a writer is evident, especially in matters of detail. He is at his masterful best when constructing vivid dramatic scenes: the youthful Baerd defying the Ygrathen authorities shortly after the cursing of Tigana; the death of Pasithea, Alessan's proud and unforgiving mother; Baerd's Otherworld battle at the side of the Carlozzini (who are modeled after the Berandanti of late mediaeval Italy); Dianora's vision of a riselka (a sea-sprite that seals the destiny of the one to whom it appears); Dianora's great Ring Dive, which weds Brandin to the land of the Palm (and which, in an Inklings novel, would most likely have brought on the climactic eucatastrophe). These episodes are remarkably literary achievements in themselves, and augur well for Kay's future ventures into mythopoeic fantasy.

