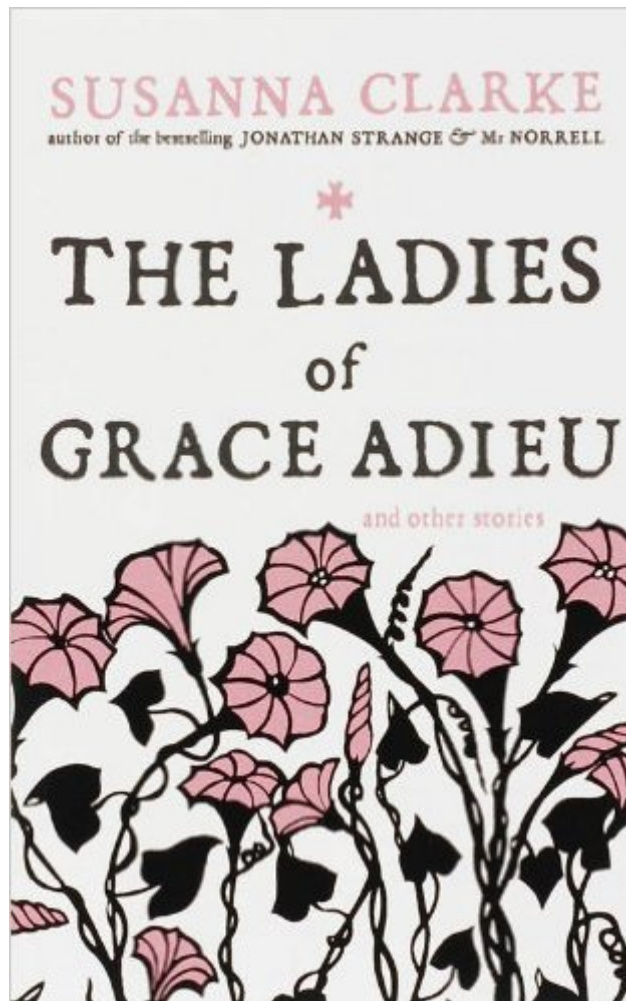


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The Ladies Of Grace Adieu And Other Stories



Synopsis

Faerie is never as far away as you think. Sometimes you find you have crossed an invisible line and must cope, as best you can, with petulant princesses, vengeful owls, ladies who pass their time embroidering terrible fates or with endless paths in deep, dark woods and houses that never appear the same way twice. The heroines and heroes bedevilled by such problems in these fairy tales include a conceited Regency clergyman, an eighteenth-century Jewish doctor and Mary, Queen of Scots, as well as two characters from "Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell": Strange himself and the Raven King.

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Customer Reviews

For those who have read *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*: This book is essentially a collection of short stories of the same kind as the various snippets included as footnotes in *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, but of greater length -- not so much a sequel as a collection of spin-off tales. It even includes at least one story referred to in that book but never detailed therein (the tale of John Uskglass and the Cumbrian charcoal burner). Only one of the stories features either Strange or Norrell as characters, but all of them (with the possible exception of "The Duke of Wellington Misplaces his Horse," which is set in or perhaps overlaps with, the setting of Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*) are set in and flesh out the same world. All share the same dryly witty, intelligent, intellectually charming writing style that made the prior novel so worthwhile. In some

ways, this collection shows more technical expertise than *Johnathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, because the stories include a number of different viewpoints, use different stylistic devices, and achieve a different range of effects than found in the novel. The author has a wider range to play with here, outside the limits of a single novel's plotline, and she takes excellent advantage of that. For those who have not: If you like Jane Austen, have a strong taste for 18th or 19th century fiction or fantasy stories, like Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* or Lord Dunsany's works, or find the thought of an mix of those two sources appealing, this book will probably appeal to you very strongly and I recommend it highly. It may be the first original short-story collection in a very long time to draw upon the same tradition as the old classics like Howard Pyle's *Wonder Clock* or the old Andrew Lang *[color] Fairy Books*, with the exception and improvement that this story collection has its own sensibility, style, and manner -- this is not a random medley of folk tales, but a deliberate product of a skilled writer working to create a specific fantasy milieu. It would be relatively accurate to describe the book as a collection, not of "fairy tales," but of recorded, historical stories about fairies from a world whose history ran (mostly) parallel to our own, but with slightly more magic. Most of the stories are written with a dry, highly mannered wit, very reminiscent of Jane Austen's writing style -- a deliberate conceit, I'm sure, and very well executed (One of the stories in the collection is an exception, a version of a classic fairy tale written in period Suffolk dialect; it may be the best-executed of the lot). This is "historical fiction" of a very specific kind. Only two stories feature historical characters ("The Duke of Wellington Misplaces his Horse" and "Antickes and Frets," which concerns Mary Queen of Scots), but the setting, tone, and style are all set in the 18th or 19th centuries and executed as if the stories were written by period authors. This is not the sort of "historical fiction" where someone writes a modern thriller and throws a bunch of historical names into the pot as minor characters -- it is historical fiction written (mostly) as if written during the time period wherein the stories were set -- one of them even is even an epistolary story, taking the form of a series of period journal entries and letters. I don't mean to imply that these stories are derivative, or exact replicas of old fairy tales, or that the style merely mimics Austen's, etc. All of those sources are drawn upon, but a remarkably modern synthesis is achieved -- this is very clearly a modern work, and there are definitely places where sex, violence, and all the other things modern audiences desire show through the mannered veneer of style and tone. But the mannered, wit-charged tone, the period conceits, etc., all are expertly utilized; the reader is left with a definite impression that all of these stories are part of an extant, coherent, and compelling world. Everything in each story fits together, and all of the stories fit together into a whole - even if none of the plotlines intersect, they all hang together in the same general web. I would not recommend this book to everyone. Some

people just aren't going to go for this sort of thing. But if you like any of the stylistic sources on which the author draws, or if you appreciate an author with a clever, unique style, or if you just like masterful writing, then you will almost certainly regret not purchasing a copy of this book. It is hard to imagine this sort of fantasy/historical fiction hybrid being executed more masterfully by anyone. If you read this book and like it, you'll almost certainly find yourself purchasing the novel as well. A final word on the illustrations: Charles Vess's line-drawing illustrations provide an excellent accompaniment to the text, both in tone and in richness of detail. They achieve much the same sort of balance that the text does, such that the viewer simultaneously realizes they are not period illustrations but is, at the same time, given the impression that could have been.

The eight short stories in this collection are set in the same England as Clarke's popular novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (which I have not read), an England in which magic is at least nominally present and faeries are human-like creatures with very considerable powers. All but one of the stories, which range in length from a few pages to 45 pages, have been previously published over the last ten years in various anthologies such as *Starlight 1, 2, and 3*, and *Black Swan, White Raven and Black Heart, Ivory Bones*. Although the leadoff story, which gives the book its title, concerns Dr. Strange and a trio of witches, the bulk of the stories (and certainly the more memorable ones), revolve around the capricious doings of various powerful fairies. A somewhat less powerful fairy is at the heart of the second story, "On Likerish Hill", which riffs on the *Rumplestiltsken* story. The third story, "Mrs. Mabb", is an excellent old-fashioned tale about a poor young woman whose fiancée has been ensorcelled by a fairy queen. "The Duke of Wellington Misplaces His Horse," is a comic interlude featuring the famous hero of the Peninsular and Napoleonic Wars, and how he survives an accidental visit to the Fairy Kingdom. Another longer, and somewhat more engaging story is "Mr. Simonelli or the Fairy Widower", in which a Cambridge scholar turned local rector matches wits with the local fairy lord. Another long and fairly decent story is "Tom Brightwind or How the Fairy Bridge...", in which a Jewish doctor and fairy lord making their way cross-country stumble upon a village severely in need of a bridge. What happens is somewhat obvious, but it's a story well told. The seventh story, "Antickes and Frets" is a somewhat perfunctory one about Mary Queen of Scots and some magical embroidery. The final story, which appears here for the first time, is the brief "John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner". It's another classic story, this time of a lowly woodsman taking on a fairy lord, matching prayers to the saints against fairy magic. On the whole, the collection should be of great interest to fans of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and of intermittent interest to those unfamiliar with Clarke's work. The prose is generally

highly formal and stylized, which matches the tone of the stories but becomes somewhat tiresome over the course of a book. Similarly, the plots of the various stories often cover the same ground (humans matching wits with fairies), so that reading the book straight through becomes a touch tedious. Taken individually, each story has something to recommend it, and I suspect that they would feel much more distinctive in their original appearances, alongside the works of many different kinds of writers. In that vein, perhaps the best way to approach this book is to read a story of month or so, mixing it up with other kinds of reading so that Clarke's voice retains its distinctive nature.

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