



Song for the Basilisk

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As a child, Rook had been taken in by the bards of Luly, and raised as one of their own. Of his past he knew nothing -- except faint memories of fire and death that he'd do anything to forget. But nightmares, and a new threat to the island that had become his own, would not let him escape the dreaded fate of his true family. Haunted by the music of the bards, he left the only home he knew to wander the land of the power-hungry basilisk who had destroyed his family. And perhaps, finally, to find a future in the fulfillment of his forgotten destiny.

Song for the Basilisk Details

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Author : Patricia A. McKillip

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From Reader Review Song for the Basilisk for online ebook

Joann says

Patricia A. McKillip is amazing and Song for the Basilisk is one of her best. Mystics, mystery, and music, this book has in abundance. Throw in a hefty dose of treachery and revenge; love and forgiveness, along with McKillip's unparalleled way with words, and you have pure magic.

"What you say, when you say a word. What you think when you say it. What I see and hear when you speak. Words are ancient; visions and echoes cling to them like barnacles on the whale's back. You speak words used in poetry and song since the beginning of the world we know. Here, you will learn to hear and to speak as if you had never listened, never spoken before. Then you will learn the thousand meanings within the word."

Surly says

For whatever reason, the typically misguided algorithms at Goodreads have been urging me to read McKillip's Riddle-Master of Hed (hmm title). Then I noticed that my spouse had picked up a Gateway omnibus edition of three McKillip novels, starting with Song for the Basilisk. Well what the heck, I picked this one up for a closer look, and was drawn into the moody prose.

About thirty pages in, I finally read the blurb on the back cover. "There are no better writers than Patricia A. McKillip," says professional shill Stephen Donaldson. Dammit! The last one-star book I read was shilled by Donaldson as well. Had I noticed the blurb I probably would have let the omnibus sit there. Ah well, McKillip's writing was not atrocious and I was now committed.

I regret to inform that there are better writers than Patricia A. McKillip. The writing is not bad: the tableaux are atmospheric, contemplative. The characters' dialogue is thoughtful if not crisp, though their motivations were not compelling or well drawn. I needed something more than "vision quest" to justify the protagonist's plunge into conflict. And Machiavelli would cringe at the naivete of the urban politics.

But the real problem here is the plotting. It's slow, at some points frankly turgid, and the characters are not quite interesting enough to carry the story by themselves. As a result the climax doesn't have much weight and it makes the trope inversion clumsier. The Song is a pleasant enough read, but not compelling enough to make me continue with the omnibus. Not recommended (but may take a look at Riddle-Master at some point).

JM says

Just as rich and lyrical as the Forgotten Beasts of Eld, this tale of revenge starts off subverting your expectations with a main character who can't seem to keep to a single name and takes his sweet time getting around to accepting his fated quest. By the time the main story really starts the guy is already forty-odd years old and has a son the age of the typical fantasy hero.

If FBoE and this one are indicators of McKillip's skill, I'll be happy to read more of her stuff. Hell, nowadays when I get to read something like this it makes me feel sorry for teenager me thinking Dragonlance and Forgotten Realms were good fantasy tales. Then again, I think I can appreciate them more now that I'm, like the main character in SftB, shall we say a little older and wiser.

The Sheila says

Interesting set-up, gorgeous writing, characters that leave me absolutely cold. As this is my usual Patricia McKillip Critical Triumvirate, you may assume the same review for any of her other books. (She has some earlier short stories that remind me of Yolen or LeGuin which seem to grasp the human element a little better, though the writing is more fablelike and thus less appealing to me.)

Ryan Mishap says

This book was simply perfect. Probably the best "high" fantasy book I've read. McKillip writes novels that happen to have fantasy elements, so the writing—metaphors, descriptions, etc.—isn't easy but mostly wonderful. She also doesn't utilize the conventions of the genre, unless it is to turn them on their heads, or explode them altogether.

The Basilisk of the title is Arioso Pellior, who took power over the land by crushing the other ruling houses, especially the Tormalyne—only one child escaped. He takes the name Rook on the island of the Bards. You think you know what comes next—young man goes to seek revenge, blah, blah. Nope, he marries, has a son, and all of a sudden we're fourteen years in the future. Eventually Rook decides he must travel to the main city—there he finds a musician who plays the one-stringed peasant instrument he does, and who is also a composer for the Basilisk. A weak rebellion is forming while Rook and his son plan a song for the leader. Meanwhile, Arioso's daughter—who he has been training to take his place—knows who Rook is and has plans of her own.

You won't see the ending coming and you should be reading this right now.

Kathy Davie says

A fairy tale for adults...and, no! I don't mean sex.

In 2009, *Song for the Basilisk* was nominated for the Tähtifantasia Award, and in 1999, it was nominated for the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature.

My Take

A typical McKillip with its lilting, poetic, jewel-like phrases richly packed with tension and description. My one issue with this story is that McKillip keeps skipping chunks. I spent more time than I wanted trying to figure out what was happening in various parts of the story.

I was also irritated with how stupid Hexel was in his final opera. He already hates the prince and he knows the story. Um, but it's just dawned on me that I had insider knowledge...oops... So, actually it was perfectly reasonable for Hexel to create a story that so perfectly parallels Caladrius' adventures.

There were a number of elements within *Song for the Basilisk* that seemed lifted from other of McKillip's stories: *Quest of the Riddlemaster*, *Alphabet of Thorn*, *Od Magic*, and *Bards of Bone Plain*. Not a complaint really, just a feel of the same 'ol, same 'ol.

I did appreciate Giulia's frustration with Damiet's obsession with colors. What serious musician actually worries about what color a song is or that she wants to wear a yellow gown and what song would match it? The secret workroom of the prince and his daughter sounded rather interesting. Impractical too as I didn't get the impression that it was all that large to be so very well equipped but definitely interesting.

The Story

There is a survivor of the night that the Basilisk destroyed the Tormalyne family and their palace. Loyal family retainers escape with the boy into the north, the hinterlands to Luly, the island school of bards where Rook Caladrius grows to manhood, learning music and instruments. He is content to live out his life on the island, teaching music until the night that the Prince of Berylon reaches out and slaughters everyone he can find at Luly.

A slaughter that sends Caladrius on his quest of revenge against House Pellior. It's convenient for Caladrius that he arrives when Master Legere is in need of someone to catalog the contents of the music library the prince stole from Tormalyne House; it gains him an in to the house and the attention of the dim-witted Damiet. A very dangerous attention which Caladrius keeps trying to avoid while Giulia attempts to train the Lady Damiet in the use of her voice, for Damiet insists on singing a principal role in the opera Hexel is creating to celebrate the prince's birthday.

Just to make things interesting, Nicol Beres is leading a band of surviving Tormalynes, and they are using the old Tormalyne Palace as a meeting place to plot the prince's overthrow timed for his birthday celebration. The day the prince celebrates as the end of strife amongst the houses...yeah, right. It's amazing how little continuing strife there is when most of its participants have been murdered or subdued.

Now, Caladrius has sent his son to his mother in the north to keep him safe from retaliation but Hollis is slowly figuring the truth out and has come to Berylon, thus setting in motion a series of incidents and murders.

The Characters

There are four Houses in Berylon: Tormalyne, Pellior, Iridia, and Marcasia.

Caladrius, a.k.a., Griffin Tormalyne, somehow survives the night that the Basilisk destroyed his family and their palace. He and **Sirina** have a son at Luly, **Hollis**.

Arioso Pellior, Duke of Pellior House and Prince of Berylon (because he destroyed the other Houses) is obsessed with killing any who might possibly get in his way. His daughter and a more likely heir, **Luna**, who has learned the making of potions and poisons at her father's knee; his actual heir is **Taur**; and, his third daughter **Damiet** who is obsessed with clothing and color, so obsessed there isn't room for much else in her head. **Master Veris Legere** is the prince's Master of Music. **Brio Hood** is a cousin of the prince, a twig-like man whom most never noticed, functioning as a spy and assassin for his prince.

Tormalyne School is a center of musical learning in Berylon. Some of its adherents include **Giulia Dulcet** who plays the picochet in a tavern, the Griffin's Egg, and the more classic instruments in Pellior Palace; **Hexel** is the operatic composer who insists on Giulia's presence as his muse; **Justin** is a minor member of Tormalyne House, plays a bass pipe, and loves Giulia; **Yacinthe** plays drums and **Ionia** the flute with Justin

and Giulia at the Griffin's Egg; **Nicol** is cousin to Justin and plays the lute; **Reve Iridia** is an old music teacher of Caladrius' who aids him with instruments and a place to hide.

The Cover and Title

McKillip's covers always make me think of fairy tales and this one doesn't disappoint. It's absolutely gorgeous in the style of a Russian lacquer box with an elaborately costumed young woman with an even more elaborate hairstyle of crossing braids and jewels playing a picochet amongst the flowers and trees framed by intricately embroidered bands inset with jewels. The back cover reminds me of medieval tapestries with its griffin tucked in amongst the other animals in the woods.

The title is accurate enough as it is a *Song for the Basilisk* that begins the end for the story's tyrant.

Black Elephants says

For the most part, I'm allergic to fantasy reads. It wasn't always the case, but an overdose in my younger years to the Occidental style then in the following years to an Oriental style cemented that aversion.

However, there are a few authors that still make me giddy, and one of them is Patricia McKillip. I think on a bookshelf, McKillip's books often get overshadowed by megastar Anne McCaffrey's collection, but off the shelf, McKillip's are much more impressive in content and cover. The covers of her books are always done by my favorite illustrator, Kinuko Craft, who's wild, beautiful, fantastic and heady imagery is an excellent complement to the wild, beautiful, fantastic and heady prose of the author.

Some things that separate McKillip from other fantasy authors I've read are the following:

1) Her plots are rarely about the fate of the entire world and how they rest on one unknown/known person. In the case of *Song for the Basilisk*, our "hero" Master Caladrius is the last scion on a noble house who is off to find revenge against the Prince of Berylon. However, Caladrius is not a young, active man with a magical sword or pet of somekind. Rather he is a tired, weary, sorrowful middle-aged man who has seen how far his enemy will go to wipe him out and doesn't expect to live beyond the pages of the book. In fact, McKillip kills the stereotypical "hero" character—a bright, eager last scion like Caladrius—in the first part of the book, just to show how doomed vengeance is.

2) Despite the liquid fantastic that spills from the pages, the plots have a lot of mundanity, which I think sets a nice balance. Whether cooking, running businesses, playing with puppets, gardening flowers, or eating food, or in the case of this book writing music, McKillip sets grounds her characters with the practical. Of course there are magicians and sorcerors of great power, but they rarely tend to be the protagonist. Often, they are the potential antagonist such as the Prince of Berylon or his daughter Luna.

3) McKillip writes the best spells and magic; she never gives away the entire story. One thing that eventually drove me insane in fantasy novels was that an author would write a sentence like: "Bellyannathor suddenly had a dream that recapped every minor detail of the dog chewing the bone, which was discussed in great depth earlier but will be mentioned now obviously and is the key to her blah." McKillip's magic is confusing, beautiful, mysterious and never completely explained, which makes her a great re-read because you always found out something new. For instance, in my latest re-read of *Song for the Basilisk*, I finally caught the one line detail of a certain spell cast over a young woman named Jena Aubade. In the end of the book, there is a one sentence detail where an old woman is just waiting to have a spell removed. Rather than explain "Oh this magic rose that I'm holding is for this old woman who actually was a young woman. But I turned her into an

old woman to save her from death," McKillip just has her character give away the rose and mention that it heals. Or as a character named Hollis says in the Basilisk book, "You turned into a raven and (SPOILERS THAT WON'T BE MENTIONED). That's all I can explain."

4) The endings are always unexpected. Even in the two titles of hers that I read and didn't care for, I never expected them. I think it's because her endings push for unusual fantasy resolutions. Caladrius is planning to kill the Prince of Berylon, but he doesn't really care what happens to the world after that. He won't be crowned Prince or gain power over something like a Jewel of Granagronog. But what makes the endings even better is that they're so simple; they've been waiting in the wings since the beginning of the story without characters or readers noticing, and even though I want to tell you one as an example, I'll refrain and won't.

Aside from that, Luna is one of my favorite, female fantasy characters. McKillip gives all of her characters a lot of respect, even the minor ones, so that everything comes full circle. Rarely are characters needlessly sacrificed or knocked into stereotypes, and I think it's because McKillip allows them to keep a private part of their minds and their intentions apart from the publicity of the plot.

Teeuhh says

How very satisfying that was. Luna pulled through for me as a character in just the way that I hoped. Hooray!

Stacey says

it was fun to read. the story telling was good. i enjoyed the writing style

C says

Review below.

The book description that I get for this book goes to a different McKillip novel.

Amazon's description:

"As a child, Rook had been taken in by the bards of Luly, and raised as one of their own. Of his past he knew nothing--except faint memories of fire and death that he'd do anything to forget. But nightmares, and a new threat to the island that had become his own, would not let him escape the dreaded fate of his true family. Haunted by the music of the bards, he left the only home he knew to wander the land of the power-hungry basilisk who had destroyed his family. And perhaps, finally, to find a future in the fulfillment of his forgotten destiny."

And of course, with McKillip, nothing is as it seems (including book descriptions - the wrong AND the right ones) and imagery is everything. Her books are a bit like falling unexpectedly into a beautiful pool - you have a moment of disorientation and confusion before everything rights itself and you have an idea of what's going on. That disorientation can turn some off at the beginning, but I urge readers to wait it out and to take

their time with it. Her books are so beautiful and full of brilliant, jewel-like images that they're nearly poetical in nature. Probably writing like hers set me up to enjoy Gene Wolfe's "read between the lines" style.

A note: Her books are those you can accurately judge the writing (not quite the story) by the covers, for once, as the covers are as beautiful and intricately detailed as her use of language.

While I love the characters and stories, I most love the unexpected wit. You don't expect it in such writing, and so when it comes along, it's all the more precious. Some of the comments surrounding one character's use of the Picochet, a 1 string violin style instrument, are quietly hilarious. Another characters awful attempts to sing were so funny - it helped lighten an otherwise darkly themed story of loss, tragedy and revenge.

I was curious about the Picochet, so I went hunting to see if it really existed. It doesn't, quite, but could be compared to two different "real world" instruments. The Chinese Erhu - a one string violin (the sound of it, most people would find very familiar), or the country style 'diddly bow' - possibly also a "cigar box violin." I imagined more of the sound of the Erhu when reading.

Finished the book tonight - it was beautiful and dark, start to finish. I find I have to really slow down and take my time with her books to digest and get the full effect of some of the scenes - they're intense and emotional, but subtly written so that it's not all laid out for you. Like Terry Pratchett's humor, if you find yourself thinking "is that what this means?" then you are likely right.

Did I mention her books are beautiful? I can never say it enough. Truly I can't do them justice. If you want a book to slow down and savor and mull over like a nice wine, this is one you might enjoy.

(view spoiler)

Althea Ann says

Wow. It is rare to read a book that verges on "perfect" – but more often than not, that book will be one by McKillip. "Song for the Basilisk" is definitely one of her best. In a pseudo-Renaissance setting, rivalry flares into violence, and House Berylon, whose symbol is the basilisk, overthrows and slaughters House Tormalyne, whose symbol is the griffin. However, unbeknownst to the Basilisk, the heir to House Tormalyne survives. His relatives find him, and secretly send the boy to a remote island music school, renaming him Caladrius, "the bird whose song means death." Traumatized by his experience, the boy does not remember his heritage, and grows up with no desire to leave the island. He finds love, and has a son. But when, after years, both woman and son grow restless with his stay-at-home ways, and leave for the mainland, he begins to remember that he is Griffin Tormalyne... and destiny (or a desire simply for revenge) draws him back to House Berylon, where he finds a place as a music librarian, cataloguing the items stolen from Tormalyne. His son also finds himself there... and the musician and teacher Giulia begins to suspect there is more to

these people than she might have guessed, as plots and intimations of revolution begin to swirl... McKillip's writing is deeply symbolic and poetically beautiful, but always readable and also not without humor.

Algernon says

[9/10] I've just finished **Song for the Basilisk** by *Patricia McKillip* and I would rate it very high, even compared with other books by the same favorite author of mine. It shows better control of plot, inspired from the Grand Opera style of the 19th Century, beautiful and evocative language, strong characters and a spectacular finale.

I have found some similarities in this story with Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana*, but each books stands on its own merits. While I rate Kay very high in my preferences, between *Tigana* and *Basilisk* I am inclined to prefer the second. Both are very emotional books, but McKillip shows a more subtle control of pathos and plot.

One of the reasons I like McKillip books is that they manage to be different from one another, while maintaining her signature style. **In the Forrest of Serre** was a fairytale, **Ombria in Shadow** was gothic, The **Riddlemaster of Hed** was big and epic, **Song for the Basilisk** is like an opera libretto, **Winter Rose** was romance.

Another attraction for me is McKillip approach to magic: we don't have here the mechanical rigid rules or the fortuitous snapping of fingers when in need, not even the years of apprenticeship and/or memorizing of scrolls. Magic remains mysterious, hidden, barely controllable and very, very dangerous on the practitioner.

a final mention on *Song for the Basilisk* : McKillip shows a fine touch for humor here, something that was less evident in other books I've read of hers.

[edit] I learned to use brackets, hopefully.

Lightreads says

Decades ago, Prince Pellior came bloodily to power in the ashes of slaughtered Tormalyne House. Far to the North on the island of Luly, a man without a name or a past trains at a school which teaches music and, to those who listen well enough, magic. The prince's birthday opera is approaching, and as the story weaves the lost and bastard sons of Tormalyne House with the teachers at the city's music school with the daughter the prince has molded in his own terrifying image, music and magic begin to tell the story of the past and the future.

Huh. Okay, so either McKillip has gotten a lot less abstruse since the last book of hers I read (*The Tower at Stony Wood*), or I've become a more inductive reader. A bit of both, I think. In any case, I enjoyed her usual imagistic style, where the entire book is wrapped in layer after layer of metaphor and the magic is as puzzling and inexplicable at the end as at the beginning. The thing about McKillip is that her universe is governed by the rules of story, rather than the rules of, say, Einstein. Her characters' lives have a sort of epic poetry about them; they inevitably circle back to their roots, fall in love with a downright Shakespearean sense for the dramatic, and generally live lives that are shaped like the very oldest stories we know.

Everything means something – reality is metaphor and metaphor is plot.

Which, taken as a whole, is both an acquired taste and one I have particular and limited need for in my diet. McKillip writes beautifully, with a compactness which requires of her reader a great deal of close attention. I admire the guts it takes to write like that, as well as to tell stories in a way which is so very different from contemporary norms of character and style. And so I really enjoyed this book, like you do a particularly rich and rare chocolate, even though it failed in multiple ways (the linchpin which turns the climax was not particularly explained, and the ultimate message about history and power and rewriting for the future took a lot of grasping on my part). But that's the other thing about McKillip – she somehow places herself outside the censure of my usual critical tools, letting me enjoy the hell out of how she does her work, while making me go blinkblink at exactly what she's doing.

Incidentally, she does include one of the most succinct and lovely definitions of magic I've ever seen.

““What is magic?””

She paused. “A word. It changes things, when you know what it means.””

Jlawrence says

McKillip doing an elliptical, lyrical take on a tried-and-true fantasy trope of revenge. On the elliptical side, it has one of the most opaque openings I've read in a while - a dense wall of confused identity and jarring sensations that rivals pure avant-garde wordplay. That opening *does* make sense once you learn the traumatic backstory of the character whose experience it relates, and as the novel goes on, it shifts more and more to conventional plot and description, but with McKillip's wild shadows still swirling in the corners.

Despite some strong moments and imagery, it doesn't quite click as a whole, mostly because the book tracks several character threads, only two of which (Caladrius and Luna) stood out for me. Every time it shifted from them, I impatiently waited their return. Things came together strongly in the end, but I feel I would embrace it more if it were a larger novel that developed those other characters more, or an edited-down novella that focused on Caladrius and Luna.

Kirstin says

Definitely a good book to lose yourself in.

McKillip had a tendency in this book to swamp the reader in imagery and metaphor, but with patience and reading on, things do become clearer. Her writing did not befuddle my sense of vision as I visualized what was going on, at least.

However, I did not fall in love with this book. Sorry, McKillip fans, it was a fairy-tale, not a love affair. :)

Amanda Kespohl says

As always, Patricia McKillip blew me away with her mastery of the English language in this book. Her words wove a beautiful dream in my head from which I never wanted to wake, even when that dream turned unnerving or heartbreaking in places.

The plot follows a young boy who is rescued from the ashes of a fireplace after witnessing a tragedy and spirited away to a rocky island to hide among the bards. He's given a new name, Rook Caladrius, and taught to forget the life he left behind. But though he's happy to hide from his past in the bards' school, the music rouses painful memories that try to stir to the surface. When the danger he left behind begins to close in on him, Rook will have to face his past or perish.

This story starts with a bang, with a beautifully macabre and tragic scene unfurling that thrills and horrifies at the same time. From there, there is romance, there is music, there is death and adventure. What more could a reader ask for?

I will admit, I'm still mulling the ending. It was satisfying, but I can't decide if I didn't see it coming because it wasn't built to smoothly or because I just wasn't paying close enough attention. Either way, I'm still delighted to have read this book and chances are, I'll reread it again and find that I'm wholly on board with it. That's usually where I end up with McKillip's trickier endings. Regardless, I would recommend it to anyone who loves beautifully written, richly imagined fantasy novels.

Joe says

A simple tale of vengeance, music, and the spirit world. What's really amazing about McKillip is how she is able to say so much with so little text. The woman is a poet of immeasurable stealth. I gladly worship the magic grounds she walks on...or I would if I wasn't afraid of some terrible curse happening to me as a result.

Cathy Jung says

Another good book by Patricia McKillip! Interesting characters & story.

Laura says

McKillip is one of my favorite fantasy authors. Her stories are so lyrical, so poetic. She is a master at hinting, at mystery, at surprise. Her stories are small and large at the same time. She has a tendency to introduce us to seemingly unrelated characters who end up being interwoven. Although as fantasy stories, there is usually an element of magic in them, they are more realistic than most fantasy in their simplicity, and yet rich in complexity as well.

Song for the Basilisk is just such a story. A boy who escapes trauma and grows up in a remote place among musicians, hiding from the past he can't remember. A journey to the underworld. A city ruled by a cruel prince and his three very different children. A musician who goes where the music takes her. Rebels and

protectors. Griffins, chimeras, and basilisks in symbols and in life. This book is the story of what happens when all these elements come together. Spectacular.

Nikki says

I've mentioned before that I had a somewhat difficult time getting into Patricia McKillip's books, and *Song for the Basilisk* is definitely one of the more difficult ones, in my opinion. I wouldn't suggest starting with it. It contains many characteristics that the other books share — Ombria in Shadow, the tyrant ruling the city; *The Bards of Bone Plain*, the bards of Luly; the lyrical, reflective prose. I have to be in the right mood to read McKillip's books, I think: *The Changeling Sea* was the gateway for me, where I really learnt to appreciate her work.

Song for the Basilisk is rather more abstruse than that one, though it is — as you might expect if you like McKillip's work — beautiful and entirely worth spending the time with, at least by my lights. Somebody wrote a review which makes a comparison between this and Guy Gavriel Kay's *Tigana*, and that's apt: there are similar themes and even images. I disagree that *Song for the Basilisk* goes deeper than *Tigana*, though: they're different in that in *Basilisk* the vendetta is more targeted and personal, against a single family, rather than erasing the culture and identity of a whole people. Your response may vary depending on personal taste and experience, but for me the denial of *Tigana* as a wellspring for identity hits pretty hard — harder than "tyrant hated powerful family because power", which is more what I got from *Basilisk*.

Some things about this book I was unsure about: I'm used to feeling some ambivalence about McKillip's characters, but Luna Pellior threw me for a loop. I was sort of expecting the ending, but I find it difficult to connect the dots. There's a kind of opaqueness about the book, about Luna, that made it difficult to see things from her perspective — or anyone's. I felt like more of an observer than a participant.

If you already know what you're getting into with McKillip's work, I don't think this will disappoint. It wouldn't be my choice of starting point, though.

Originally posted here.
