

## Asora: The Sword of Barra

**John Lovell**

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*A tight-knit cast of teens is swept into a strange land in this exciting fantasy.*

John Lovell's *Asora: The Sword of Barra* is a compelling fantasy about six teenagers thrown from their world into the land of Asora, where they learn to protect others by becoming Hearts, skilled users of weapons and magic. This exciting coming-of-age story expertly explores themes of maturity, teamwork, and living up to destiny.

The cast of *Asora* includes pompous Carrig, who will help others only if it serves his self-interest; chatty Marcus, who takes a shine to intelligent but klutzy Fawn; serious and polite Jason, who likes reticent Rebecca; and finally, abrasive loner Robin. Although Jason, who comes into possession of the sword of Barra, is ostensibly the main character, the book is actually about the ensemble as a whole. They learn to work together to solve problems and accomplish goals.

Young adults training to be Hearts are split into six-person squads. The narrative charts the development of Jason's squad as a cohesive unit, and also examines relationships that develop between members. The group focus is refreshing within the genre, where secondary characters often seem to exist only to support the hero. In *Asora*, the whole squad speaks, not just select individuals within it.

*Asora* is a well-built world peopled with interesting creatures. The squad often rides a beast that looks like a triceratops. They must fight off opponents made of water. Jason also encounters hooded beings with badger heads about whom the audience is left wondering. Such creatures are intriguing, and will hopefully be explored more in forthcoming sequels.

For all of the wonder of *Asora*, though, the novel also includes a fair amount of realism—particularly concerning its teen protagonists, who are shown to be flawed and able to respond to challenging situations in relatable ways despite their strange surroundings. When struggling through dense fog, Fawn gets lost twice and loses her shoe. When Carrig tries to get Jason to slay a beast, Jason bows out, saying “I don’t want to be dead.”

Unlike many fantasy characters who are whisked away to other worlds, these young adults think out loud about their old lives, as well as about how they feel to be away from home, and whether or not their parents were involved in their conscription into *Asora*.

Though much of the book is strong, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between secondary characters, who may be described only once or may lack stand-out personality traits. At a textual level, comma splices abound and apostrophes are often missing from possessives, making the narrative sometimes difficult to follow.

This swiftly-moving story with its relatable protagonists and unique beasts will have teens eagerly lining up to read it and coming sequels.

JILL ALLEN (January 15, 2016)

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