

Brass Carriages and Glass Hearts: A Steampunk Cinderella

Nancy Campbell Allen

Shadow Mountain Publishing (Aug 4, 2020)

Softcover \$15.99 (368pp)

978-1-62972-737-0

Brass Carriages and Glass Hearts relocates a classic fairy tale into an imagined future packed with airships, automated carriages, vampires, and corsets.

Although nominally a Cinderella story, this novel remixes that tale's familiar elements in creative, unexpected ways. Its lead, Emme, is not a guttersnipe, nor is she a damsel in distress; instead, she's a titled do-gooder seeking social justice for shapeshifters, whose "compassion and sense of justice [are] formidable." She's positioned as gifted and "truly a force. So much love in a tiny frame."

Emme advocates for magical creatures, pushing back against punitive policies that demonize them. Her work seems bureaucratic, but her clashes with government committees play out in the streets, too. From bloody fights, Molotov cocktails, and sabotage, Emme's personal convictions take her out of the parlor and into the United Kingdom's underbelly.

Emme's contentious relationship with her wicked stepsister begins as emotional abuse and escalates to physical attacks, with Emme accumulating cuts, bruises, and even a broken bone. Her physical vulnerability is compounded by her softheartedness. She is slow to fall for Oliver, the surly detective assigned to shadow her. Their enemies-to-lovers romance is wholesome and passionate, glittering against the imagined landscape of steampunk Edinburgh, where machines and Victorian conventions mingle.

The novel is at its best when it dips into the burgeoning relationship between Emme and Oliver, or into Emme's dysfunctional family dynamics. Some of its Victorian era conventions around race and gender, though, might have been better left to the ages. Its steampunk elements are somewhat offhand, with nods to Tesla torches and telescribers that are included as one-to-one representations of flashlights and cell phones, respectively.

Nancy Campbell Allen's lively reimagining of the Cinderella story features an empowered, outspoken heroine who's driven by a vision of a more equitable, futuristic Britain.

CLAIRE FOSTER (July / August 2020)

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