



Different Lee

Bill Hiatt

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Different Lee is a highly entertaining and terrifically paced fantasy novel.

Bill Hiatt's *Different Lee* is a cleverly plotted, high-octane mash-up of fantasy genres, in which a modern guy and a mythical creature ally with a group of misfits in a supernatural fight between good and evil.

Different Dragon Lee, or DL, is a womanizing loner and high-school dropout who was abandoned at birth. He lives in Le Dragon, Wisconsin, itself a failed amusement-park development—"a dead-end town even other dead-end towns looked down on."

DL begins to have strange dreams about draconic powers after a one-night tryst with a mysterious Romanian woman named Ekaterina. Suddenly, he finds himself reluctantly tasked with protecting Max Murphy, an acne-faced geek who looks up to him as a big brother, and pulled into a war that pits vampires against other vampires, sorcerers, and humanity. At stake, DL learns, is the order of the natural world.

Hiatt demonstrates an extensive knowledge of myth and pop culture, which he uses to cohesively weave together the disparate pieces of the novel—including freaks and geeks, the sword and sorcery of Arthurian legend, and otherworldly Asian folklore. Vampires represent the forces of evil while druids and faerie nobility represent the good, or light, of DL's world.

DL himself embodies many conflicting forces: his dragon nature is an emblem of beauty and wisdom, power and selflessness. There is also a twist on the beauty-and-the-beast motif, with alluring Ekaterina playing the beast and aloof, womanizing DL masquerading as beauty. This clever combination of genres and roles works to effect both humor and tension.

Some characters are more fully realized than others. The men of the story demonstrate significant emotional growth: DL in learning to balance and embrace his mortal and immortal qualities, and Max in learning how to grow thick skin while negotiating a balancing act of teenage angst and adult maturity. Women, conversely, act as damsels in distress: Max's mother resorts to cooking elaborate meals in times of stress; even powerful Ekaterina is sometimes incapacitated or halting in her decisions. The exception is the ornery ghost of Maeve Murphy, who hilariously inserts her two cents (with unintended wisdom) into tense battles. All characters, however, are well set up for following books.

Fast-paced action scenes and a natural flow of dialogue move the novel along effortlessly. Battle sequences show attention to detail, with a boom-boom-boom quality that echoes the emotional intensity and high-stakes game carried out by DL and his allies. The story's ending, though, seems somewhat rushed.

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NANCY POWELL (March 3, 2017)

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