Clarion Review

Young Adult Fiction

Forever
Running River
Hawk Feather Press
978-0-9799180-1-8
Three Stars (out of Five)

After the wild success of *Eragon*, teen writers seem to be the new sensation in fantasy fiction. Thirteen-year-old Running River is the latest voice in the cacophonous genre, penning a boy-meets-girl story. Of course, as with Romeo and Juliet and every love story worth its salt, trouble ensues. Fourteen-year-old Moon Country general Peng-Fei rescues thirteen-year-old Jungle Country refugee Ai-Shi and takes her into his home. His fiancée, the belligerent and self-absorbed Princess discovers this and threatens them both, with the help of her mother. She suggests that Ai-Shi is in league with the Moon Country's greatest enemy, the Shadow Country, and is responsible for recent killings.

The plot continues, introducing various villains and some fish which turn from white to black and devour people. Running River creates interesting altercations and villains, particularly with the Shadow folk who become black goo when killed. In terms of imaginative appeal, there is much to celebrate and the young author is able to maintain a fairly steady pace throughout the novel, the first in a series of three.

However, the book suffers from issues that a strong editor might easily address. Characters suddenly act before they are introduced to the reader. The fourteen-year-old general has risen through the ranks, which makes one ask when that would have happened—and yet, he is amazingly slow on the uptake in a variety of scenes. He rarely savvies to people's motives or possible danger. Also, the point of view shifts frequently. The story would be better served if the author had stuck to one or possibly two points of view. Motivation seems to be missing as well. A great villain tries to abduct Ai-Shi and torture her, but the reasoning is never clear. At the end of the story, the characters still lack desire. They want things, but no central desire drives the action. Most of the conflict relates to extrinsic forces rather than the characters' emotional landscapes.

On a smaller scale, the sentences, while able, could be tightened, and extraneous details might slough away to reveal a more focused story. In addition, the dialogue sounds stilted as the writer tries to deliver explanation or major plot points in the conversation. Here again, less psychic distance and a more particular point of view might help the writer to inhabit the character and work out some of the plotting through thought.

This endeavor is ambitious, and the author is to be commended for her imaginative effort and perseverance. Accomplished editing should improve the next two books.