Clarion Review

General

Halith
Kirsten Kelly
Pale Criminal Works
978-0-615-33020-4
Four Stars (out of Five)

Kirsten Kelly's debut novel, Halith, chronicles the titular heroine's self-discovery as she grows from a scared sixteen-year-old to a skilled warrior. In a world on the brink of war, peopled with dwarves, griffons, goblins, mages, Minotaurs, Orcs, and elves, the protagonist negotiates friends and foes as she grapples with her prophesied destiny.

Kelly creates characters that possess both literal and figurative strength. They leap off the pages, slaying enemies with ease while remaining emotionally stalwart. Halith is the most differentiated character among the heroes; she is clearly motivated by twin urges to fight and to find herself, and her impetuousness and anger remain constant throughout the novel. The protagonist's allies all evince similar traits, even as Kelly tries to illustrate their individuality. The evil characters, though, have shades of nuance. There are some supposed evil characters who save Halith, and some good characters who reveal their dastardly ways.

The breadth of fantastical elements in this story represents both a strength and a weakness. On the plus side, Kelly knits these facets together well, but there are so many pieces that some remain underdeveloped or unclear. For example, magic works in different ways that are never fully explained; sometimes spells hinder the heroes, and other times the mages are able to overcome the opposing spells with no trouble. Additionally, Kelly never fully explains the Dwarvish language or the relationships among all the gods the humans worship. This lack of detail is a pity, because the author's unique take on fantastical conventions elevates Halith above the pedestrian. Also distracting is Kelly's tendency to remind the reader of an important object only when the time comes for the thing to perform its function. With so much happening in the novel, important objects should be alluded to regularly to remind readers of their existence.

The novel's constant action encourages readers to keep turning the pages, but readers may want more information about Halith's pre-warrior days. Kelly's diction changes

occasionally; most of the time the characters speak in an ancient, almost Scottish, dialect, using words like nay, aye, and lass. But periodically, a character will say okay or wonky, which confuses the audience.

Women and young adults will delight in the assertive girls who exist within these pages. Kelly's descriptive abilities and narrative force will make it possible for most readers to ignore her missteps. They will root for Halith on her quest, all the way to the unexpected conclusion.

Jill Allen