

Haven's Key

Tia Austin

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Unpretentious and realistic characters put a refreshing spin on the fantasy-quest genre.

A kindly old storyteller, a slender girl who is a healer, a young boy with a tattooed face, a dishonored archer, his wife, and her colorfully furred pet/protector set off on a quest to find a legendary lost city where they will find succor against the encroaching darkness. In *Haven's Key*, Tia Austin gives this age-old story some nice twists, keeping it rather sweet and gentle and adding a touch of romance.

The twists and the romance come mostly from Brace, a lonely, low-level thief who comes upon this bedraggled party in the wilderness. Together they brave harsh dust storms and endure extreme cold and battle nasty wingless bats, spider-like creatures, and a dragon. Along the way, they meet up with the requisite good and bad people who inhabit the farms, towns, and other places they stumble through on their journey.

"We are not heroes," Brace keenly observes, for Austin has not stacked the deck in favor of this party, as most authors and gamers who embark upon such an adventure are wont to do. "We are not great men, mighty warriors. You think that this little group can possibly succeed?" It is a question that readers surely will ask, for this is a sad little band—and therein lies the charm of Austin's story.

Austin has not written a grand epic. This is neither a dungeon crawl nor a reworking of some Tolkienesque adventure. The members of Austin's party are not so much heroes as refugees; they are poor folk and commoners. Brace doesn't "even know who my father was let alone my forefathers." While they do have an inner nobility, it comes from the soul, rather than as something conveyed to them by birth. They possess no unusual skills and, even more rare in this genre, no magic powers.

What magic there is in *Haven's Key* is in the writing. Austin has created some lovely, warm, and very human characters who are slightly flawed but otherwise good-hearted and, if not overtly brave, able to summon up enough courage to get on with the task at hand. More a long walk than a grand adventure, the story is refreshing as much for what it is as for what it is not.

The cast is surprisingly real for a fantasy novel. The main characters are refreshingly unpretentious and likable, as are at least some of the other people they meet on their journey. While every strange encounter is fraught with peril, they all don't turn out badly, which speaks to Austin's vision for her story, a vision that sees there is good in people even in dark times.

Haven's Key has no blood, gore, horror, sex, or foul language, and in style and tone it is suitable for all ages, even as a series of bedtime stories read to a child. The writing is as smooth, uncluttered, unpretentious, and easy to understand as the story and characters themselves. Austin has crafted a charmingly light tale, a mostly (but not always) peaceful quest for a small group of weary wanderers who, like so many people in the real world, are looking for a nice, warm, safe place, a haven from the encroaching dark. Austin's readers will find such a place in the pages of

her novel.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (September 23, 2013)

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