

Kill Your Darlings

L.E. Harper

Shivnath Productions

(319pp)

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Kill Your Darlings is a compelling fantasy novel about inner strength and mental health that presents the question "What if you were the main character?"

An author is transported to her own fantasy world in L. E. Harper's metafantasy novel *Kill Your Darlings*.

The writer at the center of the story is no stranger to lucid dreaming, which helps her to visualize the action in her fantasy series about a dark lord who aims to plunge Solera into the shadows. She also writes about the cadre of scrappy young adults who, with a dragon, dare stand against the dark lord. But when she wakes up in the opening scene of her series finale, the author is confused—and horrified to find that she can no longer shape the action.

At first, the author tries to hide her identity in Solera. But it soon becomes clear that she can neither act as her main character nor let the story play out as she'd envisioned. She reveals herself and sets the cohort on a quest to change her book's ending, save Solera, and maybe save herself.

The book opens with content warnings for severe depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. These warnings might seem like spoilers, but they are critical to understanding the tone and characterization of the heroine, who is dealing with all of these issues. They also contextualize the impaired self-images and feelings of hopelessness that play out across the book. Within Solera, the heroine has ample opportunities to confront her depression—and multiple obstacles to overcome, all self-crafted.

The author-heroine breaks the fourth wall often, though she remains unnamed; she acknowledges her role as Solera's creator to others, and she makes frequent references to the hero's journey and the dark night of the soul. Indeed, recognizing herself as the heroine, and knowing that heroes have to be intentional about their inner changes, she is anchored in her fantasy land—and enabled to pursue her ultimate triumph. Still, the story is so focused on the heroine that those around her are rendered comparatively dimensionless. Though the heroine gave them backstories and personalities in the course of writing her series, here they seem present most to shore her up throughout her ordeal.

As it hurtles through fantastical challenges to which there are no easy solutions, the novel also approaches an understanding about what's happening in the heroine's reality; these are a moving call to strength and healing, helping to make *Kill Your Darlings* a compelling fantasy novel about inner strength and mental health that presents the question "What if you were the main character?"

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (March 15, 2023)

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