

Maiden Hills

N.L. Estrada

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In N. L. Estrada's medieval sword-and-sorcery fantasy novel *Maiden Hills*, a young queen wrestles with either maintaining her allegiance to her kingdom or yielding to her true calling as a protector of a persecuted, magic-practicing minority.

At her mother's deathbed, Princess Julianna is told that she's the descendant of a magic-practicing people, the Majians, who were slaughtered by her father, King Matthew of Yorkford. At first, Julianna chalks up her mother's revelations as hallucinatory mumblings.

Six years later, Julianna is betrothed to Prince Edmund of Westmore, King Matthew's cocky protégé whose father was killed by the Majians. King Matthew sends Jack, Edmund's adopted brother and Julianna's true love, away to manage the distant barony of Cedarville. When King Matthew dies soon after Julianna's marriage, Edmund ascends the throne. He becomes cold and distant toward Julianna.

When a secret book prophesies that the Majians will overthrow the king and reclaim their homeland, Edmund acts to destroy their remaining survivors, who are in Cedarville. Queen Julianna has to choose between her allegiance to Yorkford, her love for Jack, and her duty to protect the remaining Majians.

The book's descriptive writing is variously contemporary and flowery, but both styles work together well. Conversations between characters are formalized, evoking Arthurian epics. Julianna, Edmund, and Jack share space in the book. Their personalities follow established archetypes. Edmund is a Macbeth-like sovereign whose ambition and hunger for power drives him to tyranny. Jack plays the Lancelot role: he is torn between love and knightly duty. The men are less dimensional than Julianna, whose coming of age follows hero's journey lines. Minor characters function to advance the agendas of the royals to whom they're aligned: the surviving Majians contribute to Jack and Julianna's story, while the knights are present to support Edmund. The Majians are also a source of historical context.

Julianna evolves from a spoiled princess to a socially aware queen. The book's early chapters are slow to make room for the main characters to establish themselves, but the pace picks up as action and conflict are introduced. Heightened tension helps to set the scene for a climactic battle that mixes Julianna's conflicting allegiances.

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NANCY POWELL (August 8, 2020)

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