



Maire O'Ciaragain: The Red Curse

Karin Elder

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Maire O'Ciaragain is a bold historical fantasy novel centered on Irish traditions and spirituality; its brave leading ladies and magical elements hold attention.

In Karin Elder's historical fantasy novel *Maire O'Ciaragain*, an ancient Celtic story unfolds in the dreams of a modern-day Irish woman, revealing links between the past and the present.

Kelly is known in her small Irish town for her delicious breakfasts and sympathetic ear to the loyal customers of her cafe, Simple. While Kelly usually spends her time listening to others and giving them sage advice, her own life is getting confusing. Kelly is having intricate dreams about a Celtic woman, Maire, and her clan as they fight the British invasion of their land. Kelly's new relationship with Jim is also developing, and she is unsure how much about her strange visions she can share with him. Kelly pays close attention to the details of Maire's ancient story, hoping to uncover the connection between the two of them.

Kelly and Maire share the narrative, which switches between the past and the present, balancing Kelly's mundane life as a cafe and cat owner with Maire's adventurous, magical experiences as a pagan clan ruler who protects her land from English forces. Kelly's wisdom is displayed through conversations in which friends and customers open up to her about their problems, knowing she will have insight and ideas for them. In contrast, Maire is a fierce, bold leader who's unafraid to dip into the dark arts when her clan is threatened. As Kelly dreams of Maire's life, she wakes to synchronicities and symbols that imply Kelly and Maire have more in common than Kelly can imagine.

Maire's account brings in fantasy elements that are written with poetic language and a lenient yet knowledgeable understanding of Celtic pagan holidays and spiritual practices. Entertaining, illustrative training scenes and competitions fill Maire's childhood, while intense battles and betrayals make up her adult years. Her relationship with animal companions, like her horse and well-trained buzzard, are sensitive and moving. Kelly's world also contains some drama, though one major incident is without the emotional impact suggested by what precedes it. Supporting characters are better developed in Maire's world; Kelly's friends and boyfriend are more amorphous.

While conflicts come and go for both women, there's little in the narrative that makes their story lines cohere; their suggested connections stall as the novel progresses. A few sex scenes are included, and their graphic descriptions contrast with the rest of the book. Many dialogues are muddled and shared without spacing, and the book's misspelled names are distracting.

The major reveal is predictable and rushed, with the last chapter bearing the burden of explaining too much. Some of its connections are tenuous. Questions arise around the fates of many characters, including Kelly.

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DELIA STANLEY (November 20, 2020)

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