

Mistress of the Solstice

Anna Kashina

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Mistress of the Solstice is a superior fantasy novel with a strong flavor of romance and myth. The protagonists are both archetypically mythic and achingly human.

Anna Kashina cooks up a captivating blend of ancient myth and modern storytelling in this intriguing fantasy novel loosely based on a well-known cycle of Russian folk tales.

As retold by Andrew Lang and others, these tales involve a woman named Marya, a man named Ivan (sometimes called “the Fool”), and an immortal sorcerer called Kaschey. In Kashina’s version of the tale, Marya is the sorcerer’s daughter, his priestess, and the key to his immortality. Raised from infancy to serve her father’s cult, the dark-haired, impassively beautiful Marya annually selects a virginal girl from the population of Kaschey’s domain and presides over a solstice ceremony in which the chosen virgin is ritually drowned as a sacrifice to the river-god, feeding her father’s ever-growing supernatural power.

Into this grim scenario comes blond, pale-eyed Ivan and his companion and mentor, a preternaturally huge and uncannily intelligent gray wolf. Each has his own reasons to disrupt the Rite of the Solstice and bring the immortal reign of Kaschey to an end.

Kashina effectively blends modern novelistic techniques—shifting points of view, energetic storytelling, vividly detailed imagery, and an unsparingly modern frankness about both the darkest aspects of sexual manipulation and the brightest aspects of erotic desire—with wholehearted acceptance of the magical worldview of ancient folktales, in which the inexplicable mysteries of the world can be manipulated through rituals such as sacrifices, spells, riddle-games, and prophecies. Her protagonists are both archetypically mythic and achingly human.

Marya, beneath the cool exterior of her priestess persona, is the emotionally scarred survivor of an unspeakably cruel childhood, whose father has deliberately sought to obliterate her ability to love any human being other than himself. Ivan, despite his own dysfunctional family, nonetheless retains a stubbornly romantic hope that love and generosity can prevail against the dark magic of Kaschey, and that the dour Mistress of the Solstice can somehow be redeemed from her own sinister cult. Kashina is especially effective at conveying Marya’s growing unease and reluctant self-questioning as the life so carefully and cruelly constructed by her father begins to fall apart.

Mistress of the Solstice is a superior fantasy novel with a strong flavor of romance and myth. Readers who are willing to sacrifice a modest amount of time and attention will find themselves well repaid by its magic spell.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Winter 2014)

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