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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SCIENCE FICTION

Quondam: An Ancient Mirrors Tale

Jayel Gibson
Synergy Books (May 2008)
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The winner of the Indie Excellence Award for Fantasy and Science Fiction steers a sure course away from the wreckage-strewn shoals common to the genre delivering a well-conceptualized story which seems to reflect real history yet maintains definite originality. *Quondam* is a kingdom under the stranglehold of a fallen wood nymph Queen Karid who has ruled ruthlessly for an eon since she was forced by the gods into human form as a punishment. She's thrilled to have blood in her veins and equally happy to spill anyone else's to ensure perpetual dominance.

Karid sends fire-throwing assassins through a portal to &198dracmorae and wipes out much of that realm's ruling family in order to prevent a prophecy from coming true which says that a house of serpents will ally with a house of dragons. It isn't enough though as the queen is seriously challenged back in Quondam by an overlooked niece of the king the hot-tempered Cwen of Aaradan back from earlier books with a chip on her shoulder.

Although she is strong Cwen has much to learn about when to apply judgment and how to see the perspective of others. She finds a chance to redeem herself from her past acts saying "'I have been selfish even ruthless but this one act will give my life meaning and sweep the blackness from my soul.'" Action is the prime driver but it is a pleasure to see Cwen and other characters develop and evolve on the way to fulfilling their objectives. The thoroughly power-mad Queen Karid is the exception—she's a fountain of evil deeds from the beginning. Gibson carries over her examination of crossed species in Queen Karid's fear of a dragon/human hybrid with royal blood known as the Islander. He eventually faces a no-win decision staking his own priorities against the kingdom's.

The book's romantic scenes are about desire resistance domination and lingering bonds—not so unusual among people but unsettling when applied to a pair of dragons. Just as the female dragons in the kingdom of Quondam are a bit stronger than the males so too are a number of remarkably resolute women generally more determined and focused than the men. The subtle and healthy message of can-do capability resonates.

Fans of the series should appreciate the way Gibson moves into the meat of the story right away.

Those who come to this book without the preparation provided by earlier titles in the Ancient Mirrors series may experience a learning curve during the first couple chapters but once they're with the program readers will appreciate Gibson's fresh plotting and her Welsh-toned myth-making appeal. *Quondam* is quality fantasy which can stand alone but reads best following the other titles: *Dragon Queen The Wrekening* and *Damselflies*.
TODD MERCER (November 3, 2008)

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