

Sleight of Hand: Shadow Games

Jennifer Fales

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Fantasy readers have a great deal to be excited about in this seamless and well-thought-out world.

Sleight of Hand, by Jennifer Fales, is a complex and intelligent fantasy novel. Set in a world dealing with a high level of political unrest, the story centers on a group of individuals caught in a struggle for power and freedom.

In this sequel to *Shadows and Fire*, Lilith is struggling. She knows little about who she is and what she is capable of. She does not know the whereabouts of her twin brother, Laydon, but can hear him in her mind. She knows that though they love one another, they have chosen very different paths in life. Now, the head of Dragon House is dead, and a journal containing secrets about his illegal activities has been stolen. Lilith and her friends must fight to secure Dragon House's power before the war they know is coming destroys them all.

For readers of fantasy, there is a great deal to be excited about in *Sleight of Hand*. The supernaturals are a species engineered by humans. They are part human, part animal and their variety is great—cats, rats, dragons, dolphins, swans, and snakes. Each contains some of the personality of their animal part, a clever idea with virtually limitless possibilities. Additionally, the society that Fales has created flows very naturally from its creatures. Not only are the humans and the supernaturals separate classes, but within the society of supernaturals there are both predators and prey. This class system, coupled with a shadowy if somewhat ill-defined theocracy known as the church, is what causes the societal unrest that drives the plot. It is all seamless and very well thought out.

Fales is a talented writer who describes characters and their environment with color and clarity. The world she has developed is full and fascinating. She very effectively uses dialogue to express the ideological unrest she is writing about. For example, one character states: "Walk around the domes telling Lottery pawns, unwilling mates, and victims of other violent crimes that the horrors they experience are simply predestined—that they *had no choice* but to become unwilling martyrs so others could benefit on some larger cosmic or karmic scale—and you will find yourself beaten and shot. Possibly both."

Though the book has a great deal to recommend, the plot is difficult to follow. Lilith and Laydon are the central characters, but the supporting characters all have their own unique plot lines woven into the story. This book picks up where the previous one ended and, without an adequate synopsis of the events in the first book, the second installment is confusing. Ideally, a sequel should stand on its own with a unique plot and clear beginning, middle, and end.

Sleight of Hand reads like the middle of a single story and that makes it somewhat unsatisfying. Still, fans of fantasy will find a great deal here that is fresh and creative, making it well worth reading.

CATHERINE THURESON (January 15, 2014)

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