

Swan Maiden

Sharon Margolis

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Margolis's two nuanced protagonists hold fast to their beliefs in this historically accurate, thought-provoking romance.

Sharon Margolis's thoroughly researched, authentic, and passionate novel, *Swan Maiden*, creates pulse-pounding romance interwoven with exploration of the clash of cultures, juggling multiple alliances, and the nature of compromise.

Most twenty-first-century women balk at the idea of arranged marriage. And no lover of romance wants a forced union with someone whose beliefs they abhor. A stubborn, politically savvy, polytheistic Saxon named Kara finds herself in such a situation as she weds the leader of the conquering Franks. It's AD 797, and the Franks brutally subjugate Kara's people and attempt to convert them to Christianity. Equally determined and just as devout, Christian soldier and count Gerin sees marrying Kara as a way to garner the fealty of the Saxons whose land his army has taken. Each has sworn loyalties: Kara to her gods and clansmen, Gerin to his God and King. Can they win each other over in spite of their disparate allegiances?

Unlike many romances in which the heroine's hatred for the hero dissolves into love and acceptance of all he represents, Kara clings to her gods and her desire to help her people, even as she grows to love Gerin. She constantly plots to use her position as the countess to ensure the best outcome for her kinsmen. She aids the escape of her rebel brother, Osbern, because, for her, duty and love for family comes before duty and love to the husband whose affection she craves. She risks Gerin's wrath to demand apologies from him. Moreover, she fiercely guards her virginity until their wedding night and, after they marry, makes him apologize for a near-rape. Gerin, for his part, finds himself admiring Kara for her convictions, but conflicted about how to treat her when her words or actions seem to blaspheme Christianity. He often finds the pressure to be a good Christian example for those he's conquered at odds with the gentleness with which he prefers to treat Kara.

Margolis effectively portrays Gerin as a benevolent overlord; he makes sure his subjects are fed and advocates humane treatment of the pagans. The personal and political religious antagonism has special resonance for today's polarizing religious extremism. The story moves at a pleasing clip, thanks to the audience seeing both Kara and Gerin's viewpoints in third-person narration.

A little research reveals that Margolis grounds her book firmly in history, from the names of pagan gods (e.g., Wotan) to larger political events (e.g., Charlemagne's coronation as emperor). While the book follows the typical romance novel trajectory of love, marriage, and childbirth, enough unexpected family events happen to surprise. The use of *'twould*, *'twill*, *mayhap*, and other archaic phrasing lends realism to the dialogue without seeming forced.

The story's main fault, other than a handful of capitalization errors, is its creation of one-dimensional antagonists, such as Milon the Immunist. Because Margolis deftly creates conflict between the protagonists, there is no need for a one-dimensional baddie like Milon. Also, a slight deformity in Kara's foot, determined by her mentor to have religious significance, is only mentioned in the beginning of the book. Moreover, the back matter erroneously suggests a mythical Valkyrie may be involved in the plot. But such minor obfuscations and slipups will not prevent romantics from

enjoying this historically accurate, thought-provoking romance.

JILL ALLEN (December 9, 2014)

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