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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ FANTASY

## The Blight of Muirwood: Book Two of the Muirwood Trilogy

**Jeff Wheeler**
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In *The Blight of Muirwood: Book Two of the Muirwood Trilogy*, Lia, the heroine from the first book in the series, is settling back into her life as a kitchen apprentice in the Muirwood Abbey. Soon, the Medium, a spiritual force that guides and empowers certain people, guides the Aldermaston of the Abbey to choose her as the new hunter. With her surprisingly strong connection to the Medium, Lia quickly becomes incredibly skilled in her new role, and *The Blight of Muirwood* shares the next steps of her journey.

Charged with the protection of both the Abbey and the long-lost daughter of a fallen kingdom, Lia's fight against evil requires every bit of her physical strength. As she struggles with her place in the world as a "wretched"—a child with unknown parentage—she must strengthen her connection with the Medium. The book ends with much for Lia to discover and accomplish in the final novel of the trilogy.

To his credit, author Jeff Wheeler does not explain events from the first novel in a disjointed or forced way; background information is given quite subtly and organically. Perhaps because of its status as the second book in the trilogy, there are a few instances when an essential idea does not become clear until midway through the novel, but a reader can generally piece together enough of the action to enjoy the story.

With a wicked, deadly queen, dangerous woods, and a perilous journey, the book's plot is full of twists and adventure, and the adventurous aspect becomes particularly interesting about halfway through the book. While Wheeler includes some vivid descriptions and political history, they are not at all intimidating.

Readers of fantasy novels will recognize some familiar symbols and patterns, including some of the spiritual aspects of Wheeler's story, but there are truly unique elements, too. Understanding that the Medium's power is faith-based, Lia derives incredible resoluteness. However, some of her internal struggles seem too easily quelled by simply calming herself and relying on the Medium, although there are times when Lia showcases the power of inner strength.

Light themes about gender and economic stereotypes, religion and faith, identity, and forgiveness round out the book. While the book can be read and enjoyed as a self-contained adventure novel, much greater comprehension and engagement would come from reading the trilogy together. An entertaining adventure with spiritual undertones and political intrigue, *The Blight of Muirwood: Book Two of the Muirwood Trilogy* will have the reader eager to receive the third and final installment.

ALICIA SONDHI (April 27, 2011)

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