



The Magical Librarian of Tulsa, Oklahoma

Nancy Coiner

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The Magical Librarian of Tulsa, Oklahoma is a charming fantasy novel that's infused with myths and magic.

An escaped magical serpent kicks off an adventure across state lines for a quiet librarian and her colleagues in Nancy Coiner's fantasy novel *The Magical Librarian of Tulsa, Oklahoma*.

Kate is the senior curator of the Rare Book Room at Tulsa's College of Magic. When her disgruntled former boss enables the program's seniors to breach protective charms surrounding an ancient magical text, she is thrown into more action and adventure than she ever anticipated.

The seniors let loose a menagerie of enchanted animal illustrations. Kate and a small team of college staff manage to subdue and return all of the animals, except one: a water serpent that turns out to be more than an illustration. With her career on the line, and the prospect of romance with the handsome new professor of exotic animal sciences in the balance, Kate must find that serpent. If she manages to also find her ex-boss, that would be good, too.

The existence and acceptance of magic as a public reality acts as the book's foundation. Resting on that foundation is the academic world of the College of Magic. Enter Kate, the new senior curator and a "good girl." But being a "good girl"—reliable, trustworthy, non-wave-making—is such a central part of Kate's character that it becomes stifling. She narrates, and her adherence to traditional expectations is a constant. She internalizes the roles assigned to her in a sharp manner, and is often constrained by her inner critic; her varied interests, abilities, and strengths are subdued in the process.

Further, the book mishandles its gender and sexuality subplot. Of the book's many references to literary, historical, and mythological magic users, Tiresias is the most conjured. The blind seer was turned into a woman after striking a pair of mating snakes. The reverse happens to Kate, but in exploring this, the book repeatedly uses terms that are either outdated, as with "transgendered," or incorrect in their application, as with "gender dysmorphia." Kate's confusion and dissatisfaction with her male body is a recurrent theme, as is other people's inability to settle on an appropriate name and pronouns when addressing her.

Likewise, the book's adherence to traditional male gender roles and expectations is problematic. As Kate tries to settle into her male body as much as possible, there are scenes in which her gender identity and expression are at odds with her physical body. Because Kate is still Kate, she continues to express herself as Kate. However, there are many examples of Kate's friends and colleagues making pointed comments about how men should act and behave, thereby interacting more with Kate's body than with Kate herself. These scenes become sticking points that halt the suspension of disbelief that makes the story engaging.

When not focusing on Kate's gender dysphoria, the book is fun, romantic, and lighthearted. Kate's pairing up with Merle, a professor of exotic animals, is heavy with sexual tension that's spurred by lingering touches and soft glances. Mythological creatures, including unicorns, manticores, griffons, and dragons, make appearances. They also

provide the base of a magical black market operation. The divergent halves of the main plot—to find the serpent and subdue the disgruntled ex-curator—dovetail in a somewhat tidy fashion, but the action to get to that point is nonstop.

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DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (May 28, 2022)

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