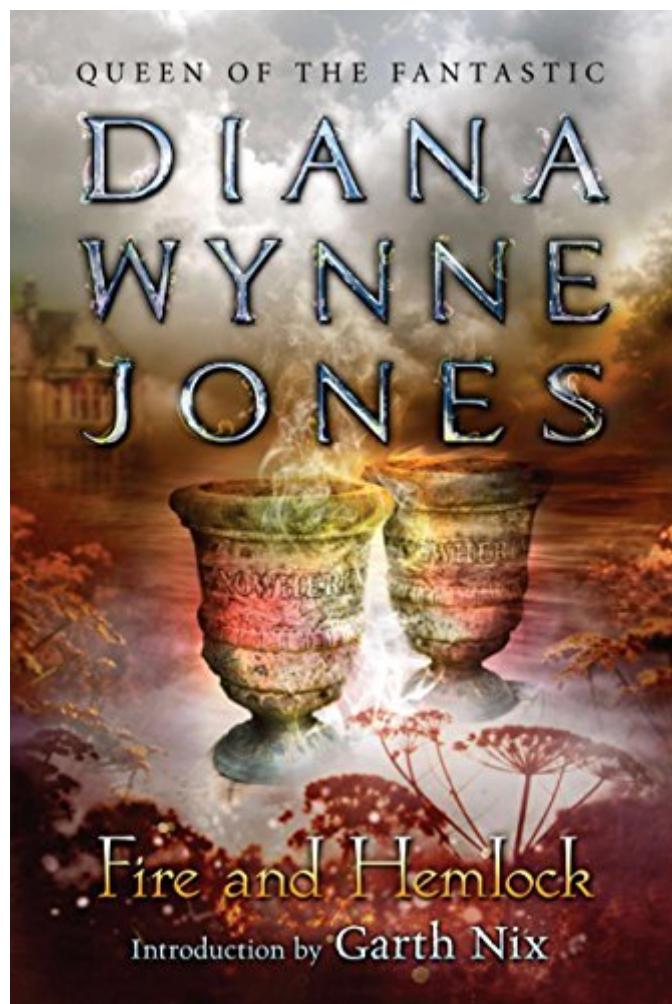


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Fire And Hemlock



Synopsis

A fantastic tale by the legendary Diana Wynne Jones "with an introduction by Garth Nix. Polly Whittacker has two sets of memories. In the first, things are boringly normal; in the second, her life is entangled with the mysterious, complicated cellist Thomas Lynn. One day, the second set of memories overpowers the first, and Polly knows something is very wrong. Someone has been trying to make her forget Tom - whose life, she realizes, is at supernatural risk. *Fire and Hemlock* is a fantasy filled with sorcery and intrigue, magic and mystery - and a most unusual and satisfying love story. Widely considered to be one of Diana Wynne Jones's best novels, the Firebird edition of *Fire and Hemlock* features an introduction by the acclaimed Garth Nix - and an essay about the writing of the book by Jones herself. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I had to give this book five stars, even though it isn't perfect. The plot is confusing at times, with holes that could have been filled in if the author had done some tweaking. Another drawback is that

some of the best characters--like the quartet--tend to be given short shrift. Yet even with these drawbacks, a fantasy of this calibre is not likely to come along often enough so as to be taken for granted. Hence the five stars. As I mentioned above, there are plot holes, but this is a side effect of the chief beauty of this book: its mystery. The story is set in our world--1980's England, to be exact--and the fantasy elements are laid on in subtle nuances of depth and detail. A slight otherworldly quality--almost too subtle to be detected--mars an otherwise commonplace funeral. Everyday events take on the significance of revelations. The magic itself is of the type that more often than not creeps at the edges of things, pervading the story with an atmosphere that is by turns haunting, fascinating, and occasionally hilarious. With a deft hand the author weaves the ballad of Tam Lin and Thomas the Rhymer together with the story a young girl, and soon enough the magic of legend and her mundane life intertwine. Polly is a "hero" in more than one sense: not only by virtue of her role as it is projected in the ballad, but also due to her struggles to cope with an increasingly unbearable living situation. It is not only the darkness of evil magic that Polly must eventually face, but also its everyday counterpart: the divorce and callous negligence of her parents. The cast of characters and their relationships are wonderful, down to every last individual; it is their believability and richness that makes this book impossible to put down.

"Fire and Hemlock" is one of the newly reprinted books by Diana Wynne-Jones, and definitely worth a read. This is one of those books that so easily could have turned into cheese, or a mediocre modern-fantasy tale devoid of magic. Instead, virtually every word and event is permeated with subtly fantastical elements. The tale starts when nineteen-year-old Polly, looking at a "fire and hemlock" picture, suddenly remembers her old friend Thomas Lynn -- the problem is, how could she have forgotten him? And why doesn't anybody else remember him? Shifting back in time, we are shown how the preadolescent Polly wandered into a funeral, and met the quiet, mild-mannered Lynn there. He remains a presence, through letters and occasional meetings, all throughout her teenage years. The two play a fantasy game through their letters -- but then Polly starts seeing it reflected in reality. To make things worse, Lynn's strangely sinister ex-wife seems to have a strange power over him. But what is it? Who is she? And how can Polly free Lynn before it's too late? This is, in places, not an easy book to read; not everyone in it has a happy ending, and Polly's life is in some ways not a happy one. We see her seesawing between her paranoid mother, who believes that everyone is trying to keep secrets from her (almost to the point of mental illness); her father, who seems absorbed in his stepfamily; and her kindly grandmother who is one of the few stable points in her life. Jones never downplays the real pains of adolescence; there is no cheap "teen

angst" here. Rather, we have Polly growing and maturing, recognizing the harsher parts of reality.

"Fire and Hemlock" is possibly Diana Wynne Jones's most complex and subtle novel, and it's certainly not for the younger readers who've enjoyed her most famous work, the "Chrestomanci" novels. It is most basically described as a retelling of the Tam Lin/Thomas the Rhymer ballads, set in 1980's England over a nine-year period. Needless to say, it is dense and complicated, filled with hidden meaning, metaphor and symbolism where two threads of life are wound together to make an intricate whole. Told predominantly in flashback sequences, we begin when nineteen-year-old Polly Whittacker is packing to go to college when her memory begins to stir. Her recollections of a book and a picture on the wall are not as she remembers them, and only when she concentrates and really begins to think does she realise that she seems to have two sets of memories - one of a mundane school life, and one that is filled with the mysterious and supernatural: all centred around a man named Tom Lynn. She begins to re-follow this thread of her life, beginning with her meeting with Tom Lynn when she accidentally joins a funeral at the grand Hunsdon House held by the strange Leroy family. Pursuing the strange friendship, Polly and Tom make up stories where they exist as superheroes named Tom Piper and Hero and meet many times to discuss this sense of reality they dub 'Nowhere'. But something strange begins to happen - these stories of theirs have a way of becoming true, and it all seems to have something to do with Tom's sinister ex-wife Laurel and her designs for Tom and Polly.

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