

## FEMINISM IN DARK FAIRY TALES

a review by Kenly Corya

T. Kingfisher. *Nettle & Bone*.  
Tor Publishing Group, 2022.

—. *A Sorceress Comes to Call*.  
Tor Publishing Group, 2024.

**KENLY CORYA** is an English Studies graduate student at East Carolina University, and she works as an editorial assistant with *NCLRL*. After earning a BA in English and Comparative Literature at UNC Chapel Hill, she taught middle school ELA and Social Studies in Tarboro, NC. She has worked as a freelance ghostwriter and editor, and her poetry can be found in *The Lookout*.

**T. KINGFISHER** is a the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of over twenty books. She has received numerous awards for her work including a Hugo Award for *Thornhedge* (Tor Publishing Group, 2023) in 2024, *Nettle & Bone* in 2023, and "Metal Like Blood in the Dark" (*Uncanny Magazine* 36) in 2021. Under the pen name Ursula Vernon, she also writes comics and children's books. Originally from the western United States, works as a writer and illustrator in Pittsboro, NC.

T. Kingfisher crafts curious and clever fantasy and horror novels that are rich with comedic acuity and lush prose. Kingfisher creates dark and fantastical worlds that manage to reflect real elements of our own society. As readers experience the unrec- onciled systemic injustices in her fantasy novels, they might find themselves recognizing injus- tices in our own world.

While Kingfisher has mas- tered the art of retellings as is evident in her reimagining of "Sleeping Beauty" in *Thorn- hedge* (2023) and "The Fall of the House of Usher" in *What Moves the Dead* (2022), she also manages to bring us an entirely new fairy tale in *Nettle & Bone*. Many readers are familiar with the archetype, the damsel in distress. We've all heard sto- ries about a princess locked in a tower who must wait for a prince to rescue her. In *Nettle & Bone*, Kingfisher returns the autonomy and authority to the princess. The princess is the hero in this story, and she must learn to subvert her society's gender roles if she is to save herself and her loved ones.

Likewise, *A Sorceress Comes to Call* is a story of women's power in a patriarchal society. While the concept of an evil sorceress is likely familiar to readers, the greater evil, argu- ably, is the society in which the sorceress lives. The sorceress is unquestionably evil, but she feels a woman must act as she does to prosper in society. It's up to the non-magical women in the book to work together to defeat the sorceress and rede- fine the concept of a successful woman in their world.

Kingfisher's captivating and heartwarming books cleave the

fantasy genre to create space for women's often underrep- resented voices. With authentic heroines and compelling villains, Kingfisher writes harrowing and hopeful stories of women's power and rage that keep read- ers engaged until the end.

T. Kingfisher brings us a wholly original feminist retelling of the Brothers Grimm's story "The Goose Girl" in *A Sorcer- ess Comes to Call*, which fol- lows the story of Cordelia, a fourteen-year-old daughter of a sorceress. In a land where sor- cerers have been mostly eradicated, her mother, Evangeline, possesses rare powers. Evan- geline works to keep her magic a secret and forces her daughter to do the same. While Evan- geline is capable of many terrifying abilities, worst of all is her ability to make someone "obedient." The first chapter begins in a church wherein Cordelia has become her mother's puppet.

There was a fly walking on Cordelia's hand and she was not allowed to flick it away. She had grown used to the ache of sitting on a hard wooden pew and being unable to shift her weight. It still hurt, but eventually her legs went to sleep and the ache became a dull, all-over redness that was easier to ignore. Though her senses were dulled in obedience, her sense of touch stayed the strongest. Even when she was so far under that the world had a gray film around the edges, she could still feel her clothing and the touch of her mother's hand. And now the fly's feet itched, which was bad, then tick- led, which was worse. (1)

Evangeline routinely takes over Cordelia's body with her magic, doesn't allow her to shut or lock any doors, and doesn't allow her to tell anyone about her mother's secrets. Evan- geline's moods are volatile, and her reactions are unpredictable. The sorceress frequently reminds her daughter, "I made you, and you belong to me. Don't forget it" (19). Cordelia never quite knows how to meet her mother's expectations and is subjected to this magical obedience when she fails. These instances of obedience are irrefutably abu- sive, and Cordelia recalls that as a young girl she "would wet herself frequently when she was obedient." Now that she's older, "[h]er mother mostly remem- bered to have Cordelia relieve herself at regular intervals . . . but Cordelia had never forgotten the sensation" (3).

Cordelia is a lonely child with few friends. Riding her horse, Falada, is her only reprieve from Evangeline's control. At home, Cordelia is primarily respon- sible for household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In the rare instance she finds herself alone at home, Cordelia relishes in the privacy of a closed door and the freedom to think and move of her own volition, to escape her mother's abuse.

Whether sorceress or peasant, unmarried women are at a dis- tinct disadvantage in this patri- archal society. Evangeline relies on financial funding from the men she charms and seduces. When one of her "benefactors," as she calls these men, cuts off Evangeline, she sets her sights on a role above mistress. Evan- geline cannot use her powers to find a husband since the sanctity of marriage vows and wedding rituals unravel magical spells. But when Evangeline cannot resort to sorcery, she relies upon a power almost as effec- tive: her beauty "was a weapon . . . and it was not an insignifi- cant one in the arsenal." Evan- geline is described as "tall and slender, with the sort of figure that poets described as willowy. She had shining dark, chest- nut hair and large blue eyes in a fragile, heart-shaped face" (24). Evangeline finds a wealthy, unmarried man called Squire, and she orchestrates a mission to become his wife without bewitching him. As a part of her plan, Evangeline and Cordelia are to live in the Squire's house

with his sister, Hester, who takes an immediate and concerned interest in the young girl.

Hester, an unmarried middle- aged woman with bad knees and keen wit immediately rec- ognizes Evangeline's sinister nature. Cordelia, who Evan- geline claims is seventeen so that she, too, may find a rich hus- band, gravitates to Hester and her kindness. Hester, sensing "Doom . . . on [her] doorstep, in the shape of a woman" (24), calls upon her dear friends to visit her home to save Corde- lia and keep Evangeline from marrying her brother. Once Evangeline begins her plan to seduce the Squire into marriage, Cordelia finds privacy from her mother for the first time in her life. In these moments away from her mother, she interacts with Hester and her two friends, Penelope and Imogene. Cordelia witnesses the power of women's friendships and schemes with Hester, Penelope, and Imogene to thwart Evangeline's plans.

As Cordelia works to subvert her mother's influence, she finds courage in the darkest times and learns what it means to be loved and cared for. Kingfisher reminds us that we may not always be able to pick the family we're born into, but we can find and choose our own family. *A Sor- ceress Comes to Call* is a novel rich with murder, magic, tender romance, mystery, and friend- ship. Reminiscent of regency culture, Kingfisher explores gen- der roles and women's autono- my (and lack thereof) in a rigidly patriarchal society.



COURTESY OF KENLY CORYA

LEFT Reviewer (and *NCLRL* Editorial Assistant) Kenly Corya meeting T. Kingfisher at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, NC, 10 Sept. 2024

Using the core of Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, Kingfisher presents a story of redemption, healing, and imagination. Kingfisher illuminates the dangers in ignoring the injustices around us and encourages us to take action. The other adults in Cordelia's life witness the abuse, and together they concoct a plan to rescue her. These characters face impossible odds and supernatural adversity, but they persist because they cannot justify idly watching Evangeline's wrongdoings when they have the chance to defeat her. Kingfisher reinforces that we always have a choice, and thus we always have the opportunity to do the right thing, even in the direst situations.

"The trees were full of crows and the woods were full of madmen. The pit was full of bones and her hands were full of wires" (1). So begins T. Kingfisher's dark and delightful bestselling fantasy novel *Nettle & Bone*. The first chapter opens with a princess in a charnel pit, and as with many classic fairy tales, she must complete a series of impossible tasks to save someone she loves. The princess, Marra, is the youngest of three sisters. She grew up like most fantasy princesses, prized and pampered. When her older sister, Damia, marries Prince Vorling from the fearsome northern kingdom, the two kingdoms forge an essential alliance. Damia should be living happily ever after with her prince, but soon after the wedding, she is returned home,

dead. To appease the northern kingdom's prince, Marra's parents offer him the next eldest daughter, Kania. After her other sister is married, Marra, the princess on reserve, is hustled away to grow up in a convent where she spends her days embroidering, shoveling barns, and delivering babies. Marra discovers that Kania is repeatedly pregnant and, having learned about contraceptives at the convent, determines to share this information with her sister. When a sickness claims one of Kania's children, Marra travels to the north, where she uncovers something insidious about the prince, which puts her sister in imminent danger.

Aptly described as a "rollicking feminist fairy tale,"\* *Nettle & Bone* challenges common issues pertaining to gender roles, family dynamics, and sisterhood within the context of a fantasy world. Themes pertaining to oppression and gender equality persist throughout the novel. Although Kingfisher's depiction of gender inequality exists within a fairy tale land, the gender biases bear a striking resemblance to real world scenarios. Marra reflects upon the mistreatment of women in her world and the systems of power that prevent women from establishing autonomy. Marra wonders, "If we were men," but then realizes, "It did not matter. They were not and the history of the world was written in women's wombs and women's blood and she would never be allowed to change it" (58–59). Marra notes the irony in her society wherein

women birth those who grow up and become the oppressors. As reproductive rights are being threatened in the United States, Kingfisher exemplifies the harm in forced reproduction, and she reminds us why a right to choose will always be important.

In a world where "Nothing is fair. Nothing is right" (181), Marra must seek justice herself. Although she is a princess, she is powerless to save her sister because she is a woman. Marra may be "kicking against the world" (57), but she is determined to kick until the patriarchal system breaks. In order to rescue her sister, she decides she must first dismantle this system by killing the prince. Marra sets out on a quest to find a powerful dust-wife, a witch who communes with the dead. The dust-wife agrees to help Marra take down Prince Vorling, but she must first accomplish a series of impossible tasks: spin stinging nettle into thread to sew a cloak, give life to a dog made from bones, and catch moonlight in a jar. Marra approaches her tasks relentlessly. Even when the nettle "burned and stung and blazed against her flesh" (69), she persists for her sister. After accomplishing the impossible, she assembles an eclectic crew to join her in yet another impossible quest: regicide. She's accompanied by the dust-wife, a dog made of bones, a former captive named Fenris, and her very own magical godmother, Agnes. Although Marra is often considered little more than a spare princess for Prince Vorling, she builds a family of her own throughout her quest.



COPYRIGHT (C) 2022 BY URSULA VERNON. PUBLISHED BY TOR PUBLISHING GROUP. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

With distinctive wit and sincere characters, Kingfisher creates a uniquely cozy atmosphere despite the characters' perilous adventures. Kingfisher makes fantasy tangible, and while immersed in her pages, the prospect of a surreal world existing next to our own no longer seems so strange: "You heard stories, of course. Stories of the Fair Folk, of little people that lived behind the world. Stories of old gods that had never learned how to die. But Marra had never imagined that there might be so many or that they might be right here, on the other side of a tree root, not far under the hills" (83). Kingfisher's heartfelt and imaginative novel will certainly appeal to fantasy lovers.

Kingfisher appeals to our darker fascinations by conjuring a strange world where people eat human flesh and princesses can build a dog out of bones;

where a demon hen rides atop a witch's staff and fireflies are the size of cats; where you could sacrifice two weeks of your life for an enchanted moth, or a creature could play a tune that makes your teeth dance out of your mouth; where you might meet a saint in a market or in "a palace of the dead" (192). *Nettle & Bone* is a spellbinding fairy tale steeped in magic and illusions. Her fantasy world is "so strange and . . . so flawed that you soon realized that anything and everything could be a trick of the light" (3), and readers and characters alike find themselves questioning their ability to trust their own senses.

While Marra spins nettle thread, Kingfisher weaves feminist theory into her fairy tale tapestry. On the surface, *Nettle & Bone* is a charming fantasy about loyalty and family, but within this heartwarming story,

Kingfisher explores fundamental flaws within society. In doing so, she also reminds readers that individuals have the power to change our world: "Nothing is fair, except that we try to make it so. That's the point of humans, maybe, to fix things the gods haven't managed" (181). Kingfisher makes the impossible feel possible, and the sense of possibility transcends the pages of *Nettle & Bone*. There may be those who try to dictate our stories or determine our fate, but Kingfisher's fairy tale reminds us that we have the authority and autonomy to challenge systems of power. In a world full of the impossible, we must ask ourselves how far we are willing to go to protect the people we love. How far are we willing to go to right the wrongs in our world?

T. Kingfisher's fantasy novels are full of heart and hope and contain unforgettable characters, lush settings, and suspenseful plots. With distinctly clever prose, Kingfisher's characters channel her wit and humor despite the dark settings. Kingfisher crafts compelling antagonists whose villainous actions motivate her characters to make remarkable choices. Aside from her ability to captivate and entertain, Kingfisher thoughtfully explores injustices in her fantasy worlds while illuminating issues pertaining to gender inequality in our own world. T. Kingfisher is an unquestionable force within the fantasy genre, and *A Sorceress Comes to Call* and *Nettle & Bone* are not to be missed. ■

\* From blogger Jaclyn Fulwood's description of the novel on *Shelf Awareness* 24 Mar. 2023: [web](https://www.shelf-awareness.com/2023/03/24/nettle-and-bone-by-t-kingfisher/).