

# **"AT THE END OF THE WORLD, KINDNESS AND LOVE WERE REQUIRED": MORALITY BEYOND THE GODS IN *STARLESS***

Review by Kaja Franck

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Carey, Jacqueline. *Starless*. Tor, 2018. Novel.

Jacqueline Carey is a prodigious Fantasy writer: she has published standalone novels and multiple series, all notable for their powerful female characters and richly developed worlds. Her most recent novel, *Starless*, is a standalone Fantasy novel, suitable for adult and young adult readers alike. As the title suggests, *Starless* is set beneath a night sky that lacks the familiar gleam of stars. Instead Carey creates a world in which stars are the children of Zar the Sun and his three wives, the moons: Bright, Dark, and Wandering. Much like the fallen angels in Carey's earlier series, the Kushiel's *Legacy* trilogies, starting with *Kushiel's Dart* (2001), the stars displease their father and are thrown from heaven. Falling to earth, they become gods shaped by the countries in which they fall and the people who praise them. Unbeknownst to Zar, the Wandering Moon had secretly become pregnant. Following the birth, her child, Miasmus, is also expelled despite having done nothing wrong. Prophecy dictates that Miasmus will bring about the end of the world. The protagonist of the novel is Khai, one of the humans chosen by a god. Khai's desert nation of Zarkhoum is ruled over by the House of the Ageless, also known as the Sun-Blessed. Chosen by Parkhun the Scouring Wind, Khai is born during a lunar eclipse. This marks him as the shadow-twin of the Sun-Blessed princess born on the same day, Zariya. Carey's narrative follows Khai's training with the Brotherhood of Pahrkun as a warrior, his meeting with Zariya and their journey, along with other chosen individuals, to overcome Miasmus and prevent the end of the world. The writing is rich and lush; landscapes appear, mirage-like, in front of the reader. The descriptions of the desert and experience of Pahrkun the Scouring Wind are particularly evocative. Thirst parches the throat of the reader as they travel alongside Khai into the desert to face the god by whom he has been chosen. However, the pace of the narrative does suffer a little towards the end of the novel and the final sections feel rushed. The plot takes over from the textual world, leaving the characterisation and imagery weakened. Thus the death of key characters lacks the emotional punch that would have strengthened the complex morality of Carey's narrative. This undermines the time taken in the first third, "Desert," to build a complete and complex world.

Carey's previous series feature strong female protagonists and plenty of queer representation. *Starless* does not deviate from this: Khai is a potent warrior, defined by his ability to kill. Khai is also a *bhazim*, a girl brought up as a boy. It is not until he is twelve that Khai discovers this. The novel refers to Khai using masculine pronouns, something which is preferred by him and respected by Zariya. Khai's experience of being able to present as both male and female, and the sense of

disconnection from his body is threaded throughout the narrative without becoming the defining aspect of his personality. More central is his relationship with Zariya: connected through fate, their relationship is beautiful and heart-breaking. Friendship, love and duty are intertwined powerfully as they cross myriad landscapes and grow into individuals who learn to choose their own paths. Khai's physical strength is paralleled with Zariya's disability; due to an illness in her youth, Zariya is unable to walk without canes and lung-damage weakens her. Carey does not diminish the reality of this: at one point, Khai has to aid her in using the toilet and her daily ablutions. Yet, through Zariya's wit, intelligence, and compassion, she often seems stronger and more capable than Khai. These dual protagonists are fully imagined, reflecting the challenges of their childhoods and their experiences impact on the narrative rather than being depicted as mere device. The depiction of Khai's gender does allow for Carey to broach issues of gender fluidity. There are however limits to these attempts to dismantle gender binaries. The male sea-wyrm, a being in the guise of a traditional sea monster, can be distinguished by his size – he is larger, following normative depictions of male and female. During a scene in which one of the men in the fated crew, standing against Miasmus, needs emotional comfort, the other men take him to the pub whilst the female members stay in their rooms. Yet, small slippages aside, the inclusion of characters who do not confirm to normative tropes is heartening. Carey imbues her characters with humour, compassion, and humanity regardless of species.

As the novel progresses, what differentiates it from more formal high Fantasy is humour. Subtle at first, the wit of certain characters cuts acerbically through the talk of prophecies, gods, and honour. Khai's first companions in the Brotherhood of Parkhun embody this honour and make clear the perceived nobility of being a warrior. They are quickly replaced by the arrival of Brother Yarit, a thief who does not want to be in a desert training for a war that may never come, which is vocalised through his prodigious use of swearwords. Knowledgeable in underhand tactics, Yarit becomes the means by which Khai comes to understand that there is "honour beyond honour," a term used throughout the novel. This concept allows Carey to disengage from over worn depictions of warriors as scions of duty – even at the expense of common sense. Humour is employed at these points to clarify this position, softening the formalities of the world of *Starless* and bringing it closer to the reader.

The use of humour is echoed in moments of familiarity which imbue Carey's fantastical landscape. These ground the narrative and open it to more complex scrutiny. The names of gods and animals are achingly familiar. Some draw to mind memories of other childhood stories: one of the many fallen stars, Luhdo the Loud, who gifts his chosen saviour with the ability to create sound waves that crack rocks, is surely a reference to Ludo the friendly, hairy 'creature' from *Labyrinth* (1986). And, though the sharks have wings, Khai learns about crows "–a crow being a Therinian bird of some sort" (377). Khai, a desert dweller, has not seen a crow which are native to other lands. It is a wry moment of humour in which a bird familiar to the reader is made unfamiliar, indeed foreign, through the eyes of the central protagonist. This encapsulates Carey's intelligent engagement with cultural difference through the fantastic. These echoes and similarities do not come across as lazy writing. Instead, they suggest a self-awareness and playfulness that enriches the tone of the text. The Therinians, who hail from Northern climes, engage in language-play and understatement which

can only be a parody of British 'banter.' In certain cases, these allusions reinforce the reading of the text. Structural aspects of the novel are suggestive of other narratives: the final scenes are reminiscent of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and the destruction of the ring. Following this, the return of Miasmus, the wrongly exiled star, to the heavens recalls the tale of the Prodigal Son (Luke, 15:11-32). Khai interprets these events: this as for "failing to destroy the world, Miasmus was rewarded with a homecoming to the heavens from which he had unjustly banished" (561). Though the majority of the world has been saved, there is no clear sense of a battle won. All the stars return to the sky leaving the world godless and with no clearer sense of the divine plan laid out by the prophecy. It is not clear to Khai why Miasmus should be accepted back into the heavens given their many sins. The similarities with the Prodigal Son are subtle enough that the critique of religion is not a nihilistic rejection of all belief. Khai and Zariya are marked by the gods themselves, meeting them face to face. The evidence of the divine is not enough, however, to offer absolute clarity. The gods, much like stars, are incomprehensible even when we can see them before us: seeing may be believing but it does not lead to understanding. Moreover, the choice of which god you follow is an accident of birth predicated by geography rather than personal faith. Carey conforms to the god-bedecked worlds of Fantasy but unlike Tolkien's Christian-infused novels, she is more subversive in her depiction of gods and morality. In this way, and with the inclusion of diverse characters, it points to the way in which Fantasy is, and must be, shaped by the society in which it is created.

#### BIONOTE

**Kaja Franck** was awarded her PhD in 2017 in UK. Her thesis looked at the literary werewolf as an ecoGothic monster, concentrating on the relationship between wilderness, wolves, and werewolves, and how language is used to demarcate animal alterity. She is part of the 'Open Graves, Open Minds' research project and has published on the depiction of wolves and werewolves in Dracula and young adult fiction. She also edited the online journal *Revenant's* special edition on werewolves.