

Alamut Short Guide

Alamut by Judith Tarr

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Characters

Aidan is an immediately appealing character. He is quite unlike his cousin Alf of the Hound and Falcon trilogy.

Outwardly he is the very figure of a fine knight: dark-haired, lithe, and well-built. He is dashing, courageous, devil-may-care, gallant, and loyal.

Inwardly he is these things too. But only Aidan knows the contradictions hidden by his elevated status. As a prince, he automatically has rank and respect, but in his homeland he is always the younger brother, and usually travels alone. His mixed human and elven parentage meant that he grew up without a mother. He sometimes draws hostility even from the people he is defending, and his automatic tendency to tell the truth does not necessarily help. He can read others' thoughts at close range. This is not always an advantage, either. Sometimes it is an embarrassment, or a drain on his energies. Even the magic that he relies on to defeat the Assassins proves inadequate against Morgiana's powers.

Bravely or foolhardily, Aidan persists in his quest. Even in his darkest hours, he does not quite give up — although he sometimes asks himself if quitting would be wiser. His doggedness and ability to land on his feet keep him going. Finally he manages to confront the Old Man of the Mountain and win some concessions, a task which everyone had told him was impossible.

Then, of course, when he returns to Jerusalem, he finds everything different from the way he thought it would be. He copes with this too, although not without some shocks, and wins the promised place at the young King's court.

Although Aidan is the center of the book, the two main female characters are vivid and important. Joanna, who flees from a husband who has sent away her newborn child, uses fierceness to hide her vulnerability. Only gradually does she learn to trust anyone again. Morgiana plies her assassin's trade to mask her loneliness. She is a master of disguises which give her entree anywhere, and the wielder of powers equal to the legendary jinns'.

Yet until these events give her human connections, she is not sure she even exists. Joanna is easy to identify with.

Morgiana, because she is first met carrying out assassinations, takes a bit more time. Yet by the end of the book the reader is likely to hope both Joanna and Morgiana find a happy future.

Other unique characters fill the pages as they fill the streets and courts.



Farouk the swordsmith introduces Aidan to intrigues and people that complicate his mission. Aidan meets caliphs, wise old women, traders, Bedouin tribesmen. There are brief glimpses of some historical figures, including Saladin himself.

The most dubious character in terms of motivation is Sinan, the Assassins' leader. It is plausible for him to seek more power and wealth by marrying into the House of Ibrahim. His belief that a series of murders of the lady's kin will win her seems less plausible, except, possibly, to an assassin, but even this is problematic.



Social Concerns

During the twelfth century, Jerusalem was a Christian kingdom, after being recaptured from the infidels during the First Crusade. Here and in the surrounding lands, the differences between Christians and Muslims loomed large. A Holy War continued between the two groups, each pressing the truth of its own faith. Or so it was in theory. In reality, commercial rivalries and cultural differences divided both sides, and leaders made common cause with a faction of the enemy whenever it suited them.

Into this cauldron of danger, intrigue, and civility comes Prince Aidan of Rhiyana. Seeking only adventure, he arrives at his kinsmen's castle just after its lord Gereint has been stabbed to death. The tragedy bears the mark of the mysterious Assassins. A young boy of the family is the next victim. Aidan swears to extract vengeance. He sets off to face down the assassin in a stronghold of the sect, deep within Syria.

The richness of medieval Islamic life soon envelops him. He travels with camel caravans and lodges with a prosperous swordsmith's family. He finds unexpected friends and enemies, gains and loses a company of troops, and faces alien magic. In all these experiences he confronts the shock of the different. But it has some unexpected benefits. Rather than the suspicion his half-elven nature usually draws, his pale skin and strange gray eyes merely evoke the comment, "Of course, you're a Frank." Even when his magic is revealed it is greeted with tolerance: the powers of an afrit are well-known. The differences in religion and culture prove less important than universal human motives of loyalty, friendship, greed, vengeance, and love.

Men and women, and the games of power and love they play with each other, form the other major motif of the novel. It is a long way from our time back to the medieval Near East. Muslim women went veiled and lived secluded lives, and Christian women of good family were married off for political benefit. Yet Tarr's story shows the distance to be deceptive. Women in this novel leave their husbands because of ill treatment, and they sometimes return when the men are properly chastened. Women of the harem control the business decisions of some merchant houses. Aidan's would-be assassin turns out to be a woman. She answers his accusations by asking whether deaths in the knightly pastime of warfare are less regrettable. If so, is this only because warfare is an accepted male pursuit?

Tarr's well-woven tale makes these events believable even in a sharply patriarchal world. Moreover, Alamut's love stories show that in matters of the heart, both men and women are vulnerable — and deceptive. It is a truth often lost in our own concern with gender roles and social change, but Tarr makes the point vividly and delightfully, without seeming to send a message.

Techniques

Readers familiar with the terser style of some other Tarr novels may be surprised by this one. Its prose is descriptive as well as direct and straightforward. Settings are portrayed in lush and sensory detail. Cool crystalline fountains in shaded gardens, the damask rose scent of the women's quarters, the noisy confusion of a camel caravan arriving in a city — all seem to exist right in front of the reader's eyes. The love scenes are written in splendid prose that touches the heart as well as the senses. The author is always interested in the historical and character elements of her story. In this book she has taken the same care with the material background, and it shows. Besides building a bigger, more colorful novel, this expansion has other effects. It enables readers to share Aidan's journey more fully. The exotic cultures come alive. The characters' emotional lives and dilemmas seem more poignant within a multisensory framework. The style removes the distance from the reader which exists in certain other of Tarr's novels. The story structure itself is simple, although it takes enough twists and turns to maintain suspense. Alamut is a quest novel, albeit an adult quest novel with little of the blood-and-thunder of heroic fantasy. Nor does Aidan have the bravado and naivete of adolescent heroes of such stories. He pursues his mission as an intelligent and wary traveler in a strange land. The resolution, although it does change his life, takes on added meaning from his earlier connections and achievements.

Themes

The themes in *Alamut* are multiple but unobtrusive. Along with much medieval fantasy, it has a theme of oaths and promises. The emphasis is on the costs they extract rather than on the wickedness of breaking oaths. Aidan keeps both his oaths, to confront the Assassins and then to come back and swear fealty to the young King of Jerusalem, but the way is difficult. Morgiana, who is both his antagonist and his lover during the story's course, ultimately breaks an oath she swore to the Old Man of the Mountain. She has good and sufficient reason. He had refused her earlier plea for release, and she initially took her oath from bad motives, but her release from it too is difficult and full of danger. Joanna returns to her husband for several reasons, including her marriage vows.

It is the hardest thing she has ever had to do.

Self-knowledge is another strong story theme. Aidan's deeds reveal things Aidan does not even know about himself. His impulsive oath to avenge his kinsmen's deaths leads to the insight that family is important to him, even the family he had not known before. Confronted with Muslim ceremonies, he finally realizes he is a real Christian, despite the church's distrust of his elven nature. Given a company of mamluks, he learns he can command men by example rather than the bombast he has seen others use.

Morgiana learns even more. In all her long life as an ifritah and assassin, she has never faced her loneliness straight on. Pleading Aidan's case to the Assassins' leader, she realizes that her assassin's oath stemmed only from her need to belong somewhere. She schemes for Aidan to make love to her, never admitting her deviousness, then discovers that they are attracted to each other.

The cruelties of the harem do not appear, despite the setting. Rather, the book celebrates female sexuality and desire. Although the story is primarily Aidan's, the love affairs are told as much from Joanna's and from Morgiana's points of view as from his. Both take the initiative with him and show no hesitation in enjoying the union.

This theme is even more surprising because much female-authored fantasy either ignores sexual desire or treats it only in terms of male lust. Neither woman's interest in Aidan is only physical, and the affairs lead to further consequences. Still, both women win in different ways, and so does Aidan — a delightful and unexpected ending which reinforces the theme.



Key Questions

Alamut is one of Tarr's most popular and widely known books. It would be a good first choice for any discussion dealing with her work as a whole. Its medieval Near East is an exotic place, but it does appear as the locale of a fair amount of fiction. Many novels of the Crusades take place there. Susan Shwartz has also used it as a background for fantasy novels. And of course there is the Arabian Nights, a treasure chest of wonder stories originating in that time and place. A session which included some of these works could be interesting for the contrasts in point of view and approach.

Alamut is almost a textbook example of character development. Each of the three main characters has to face what he or she fears most, before winning through to a happy ending. Examining why this is so could be illuminating about fictional structure and possibly about how such structure represents life.

1. Alamut's striking cover art was designed to grab three audience segments: historical, fantasy, and romance.

What are its elements that speak to each of them? Are they true to the story as well? Do you think these audiences are as separate as this analysis implies?

2. Is Sinan's belief that killing her kin will make the lady Margaret marry him realistic? Why or why not? Is Sinan himself high on the hashish his sect made famous? Could there be other good reasons for his mode of operation?

3. Morgiana is a completely different person with her friend Sayyida and the baby Hasan than in her assassin's role.

Are these both the "real" Morgiana?

What does each woman have that the other one needs?

4. Morgiana is sometimes called an afaritah or a jinn, creatures from Arabian mythology. Yet she recognizes Aidan as someone like herself. Are these figures truly compatible with elves, either in the standard legends, or as Tarr has drawn them?

5. After they have confronted Sinan and won, Aidan leaves Morgiana to search for Joanna. By this time he thinks he is in love with Morgiana too.

What factors influence his decision to go back and look for Joanna?

6. Joanna, meanwhile, has decided that her only choice is to return to her husband. She plans to convince him that the child she carries is his. Is this justified? Is it practical? What other options, if any, did she have?



7. As their commander, Aidan often has to quash the mamluks' noisy support, lest it cause more trouble. They are magically whisked away just when the going gets tough. Overall, have they been more benefit than trouble to him? Why or why not?

8. Even though Muslims and Christians were involved in a holy war against each other, cooperation and trade were as common as enmity. Factions of each side also spent much time struggling with their co-religionists.

This process happens frequently in world (and other) politics. What do we call a leader who refuses to recognize it? What have been the twentieth-century exceptions? Were they justified as "holy wars"?

9. Is Morgiana's argument, that assassination is no more immoral than the killing of innocents which occurs in war, valid? Does the way the warrior has been celebrated as a paragon of male virtues affect our judgment, as she claims?

10. Alamut is set in two societies usually called repressive of female sexuality: medieval Christianity and medieval Islam. Yet the women of this story show a frank appreciation of the male body. Both Joanna and Morgiana go after Aidan without any hesitation.

Is this realistic? Does it matter?

Literary Precedents

As an adult quest novel, *Alamut* is reminiscent of some of the tales and deeds of King Arthur's knights. The setting draws as much on the magic of the *Arabian Nights* as on the solid historical works cited in the Author's Note.

Tarr credits Andre Norton as a formative influence on her work. Faint traces of motifs from Norton's *Witch World* are visible here, such as Morgiana's greater magic. However, there is no totally comparable work in modern fantasy. The sophistication of Tarr's characters and the positive treatment of female sexuality are almost unique in the genre.

Related Titles

Alamut is set in the same fictional world as the Hound and the Falcon trilogy. Aidan and his brother King Gwydion are secondary characters in that trilogy. "Defender of the Faith," a story about Morgiana, appeared in Moonsinger's *Friends* (1985), an anthology published in honor of Andre Norton.



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