

Daggerspell Short Guide

Daggerspell by Katharine Kerr

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Overview

Daggerspell begins the story of Nevyn, a disowned prince, who becomes a master of the magic art of dweomer. He does so to atone for his youthful indiscretion that resulted in the disgrace and death of those nearest to him and his own banishment.

The first part of the story takes place in the seventh century, when Nevyn (then named Prince Galrion) is torn between the girl he loves and his desire to study the magic discipline of the dweomer. He inadvertently causes his betrothed lover and her brother to engage in incest, leading to their deaths, as well as the death of a rival suitor. Prince Galrion is disowned by his own father who now calls him Nevyn (which means "no one"), and he is cast out forever from the privileged noble class. He makes a vow to never rest until he atones for his errors, and the gods hold him to his pledge. Nevyn leaves with a master of the dweomer to study herbal healing and slowly learn the ancient magical lore that will aid in his attempts to fulfill his destiny.

Most of the balance of the novel takes place 400 years later, with Nevyn as an old master of the medical arts and the dweomer.

Nevyn has been kept alive by the gods and the magical crafts he has learned. Over the generations, he continues his task of identifying the persons who are the reincarnations of his long-lost lover and her brother. Whenever he identifies those who now carry their souls, a task that requires all of his subtle dweomer skills, he must seek to intervene in their lives to help them avoid once again their tragic fate of centuries past.

A girl named Jill is the latest reincarnation of Nevyn's lover, and a prince named Rhodry is her reincarnated brother. Jill has a talent for the dweomer, as evidenced by her ability from childhood to see and communicate with the Wildfolk, gnomish sprites that are magical creatures invisible to most humans. She is the illegitimate daughter of a mercenary named Cullyn, the best swordsman in Deverry, who is also a "silver dagger," a disgraced soldier cast out by a nobleman's house. When her mother dies suddenly, Jill continues to work in her mother's role as a waitress at an inn, before being taken away by Cullyn, who is a sword for hire, for a life on the road. While with Cullyn, who ends up being a good father, she learns the ways of sword craft, while hiding her dweomer talents of talking to the Wildfolk.

The most compelling sections of the book occur once Nevyn identifies Jill, Cullyn, and Lord Rhodry as the latest reincarnations of the three people whose deaths he caused four centuries earlier, and he works to try and avoid another tragic end to their lives.

Cullyn and Jill are hired to guard a trader going to visit the dangerous lands to the west, which are populated by elves called the Elcyion Lucar. Nevyn goes along as well in his guise as a traveling herb healer.

The elves, who can all see the Wildfolk, recognize Jill's undeveloped dweomer skills.



While returning, Jill, Cullyn, and Nevyn are attacked by insurgent lords who are seeking to overthrow Lord Rhodry. They eventually meet up with Rhodry, who is fighting to save his birthright lands and his honor against the conspiracies of his jealous older brother, the King of all Devery.

Rhodry also discovers that he is half-elvish, a fact that will play a major role in his destiny. All of Nevyn's dweomer skills and Cullyn and Jill's fighting skills are needed to attain an honorable end to the conflict, in which unknown practitioners in the dark dweomer arts are involved.

In the end, however, Rhodry's jealous brother tricks him into an indiscretion that leads to his banishment. At the end of the novel, Rhodry escapes his brother's assassins to become a silver dagger, and Jill follows him as partner and lover. The later novels continue the adventures of Nevyn, Rhodry and Jill, with Jill becoming a dweomer master in her own right.

About the Author

Fantasy and science fiction author Katharine Kerr was born (as Katharine Brahtin) on October 3, 1944, in Cleveland, Ohio. She never knew her father, who was killed in the Battle of the Bulge during World War II.

When Kerr was an adolescent her family moved to Santa Barbara in Southern California. After briefly attending Stanford University in the early 1960s, majoring in classics, she moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where she has continued to live. She held a number of low-paying jobs after leaving Stanford, while being involved in various civil rights and feminist movements.

She also read extensively in the fields of history, language, and literature, becoming a mostly self-taught scholar in medieval, especially Celtic, history. Kerr can read Latin, French, and Welsh, as well as some Spanish and Italian, but can speak only English.

Kerr became interested in fantasy roleplaying games in the late 1970s, after receiving one as a gift. In the early 1980s, she entered the fantasy role-playing gaming field as a game designer for TSR, Inc., and as a contributing editor of the company's gaming magazine, *Dragon Magazine*, for which she wrote articles. Since the mid-1980s, she has worked as a freelance author of medieval fantasy and science fiction novels and short fiction. She also co-edited three anthologies of fantasy short stories in the mid-1990s. She currently lives in San Francisco with her husband, Howard Kerr, whom she married in 1973.

Although born and raised in America, Kerr's family's British ancestry was a major influence in her youth; she was taught to read from British books. Her other outside interests include sports (especially baseball) and cats.

Setting

Like the books in the Deverry series, *Daggerspell* is set in the imaginary European Kingdom of Deverry, in post-Roman times, between the seventh and eleventh centuries. The Celtic peoples who live in the area are ruled by local feudal lords who themselves are loyal to the King; all live under conditions that are historically accurate for the time and place. A few people, however, through a combination of inherited talent and lifelong training, are able to employ magic, called the dweomer, and communicate through higher levels of reality with a wide variety of magical creatures, ranging from the whimsical mute gnomes called the Wildfolk, which normal people cannot see, to godlike beings far removed from human reality, but nevertheless very interested in and able to indirectly have powerful effects on the affairs of men.

Critics have praised the setting for *Daggerspell* calling it marvelously rendered, with great attention to detail, especially the life and attitudes of the people of the time.

Kerr's handling of the magic dweomer powers is also superb, and among the most compelling landscapes described in the novel are those of the higher "astral planes" where the dweomer masters travel, and where the Wildfolk and other mythical creatures live, interacting only occasionally with normal humanity. At the highest levels are the godlike creatures that determine human destiny. The concept of the astral plane seems to be a combination of both ancient myths and more recent "New Age" concepts.

Social Sensitivity

Daggerspell contains many violent conflicts, but although the violence is more graphic than that found in most Tolkienesque fantasy novels, it is never gratuitous or overly graphic. The grim and bloody wars fought by its valiant protagonists generally occur within the characters' strict system of personal honor, and Kerr is expertly able to convey the horrors of medieval warfare without undue glorification.

The novel also has a number of sex scenes, including one incestuous incident between a brother and sister. But these scenes are delicately handled, and are almost always between young characters deeply in love who are overwhelmed by their emotional desires, treating sexual relations as the ultimate expression of romantic love. There are threatened occurrences of and references to rape, but no violent sex scenes described.

Despite this expert handling of sex and violence in Daggerspell, the complex plot and themes make the novel and the others in the series most suitable for late adolescent readers.



Literary Qualities

Daggerspell and the latter novels in Kerr's Deverry series are among the best Celtic fantasy novels written to date, both in depth of character development and the realistic complexity of the setting. Kerr has modernized the mythos created by such early fantasy writers as Kenneth Morris and Evangeline Walton. Her books have similar depth to those of other medieval fantasy authors such as Katharine Kurtz and Charles de Lint.

Of current writers in the field, possibly only Robert Holdstock's Mythago series has superior depth of setting and characterization.

Kerr also gives a great deal of attention to the language of the time, which she describes as Neo-Gaulish, and as part of the Celtic family closely related to Welsh, Cornish and Breton.

Kerr's attention to detail also extends to the plot of the novel, which spans four centuries, and includes numerous reincarnations of the same characters who remain distinct while retaining some of the characteristics and destinies of their past lives.

This complexity did lead to discrepancies in both Daggerspell and Darkspell, which Kerr later revised for reissue.



Themes and Characters

Kerr's deep and opulent portrayals of her major characters—especially Nevyn, Jill, Rhodry, and Cullyn—are among the novel's greatest strengths. Although each is clearly a product of their times, they also demonstrate positive modern sensibilities regarding such things as respect for women and those of lower social station. These attitudes set them apart from their medieval setting.

Among the primary themes of *Daggerspell* are honor, loyalty, and responsibility. All of the more admirable noblemen are driven by a highly complex system of honor that confines their actions at every step of their lives. Although much of that honor system deals with the waging of war or other violent challenges to their authority, it also extends to treating loyal subjects with respect. The importance of loyalty, both between noblemen and between rulers and their subjects, is also a major theme. But the strongest theme in Kerr's novel may be that of responsibility, and in particular taking full responsibility for all of the consequences of one actions and inactions.

The primary example of the theme of responsibility is portrayed through Nevyn, who takes perpetual responsibility for the dishonor and death of his lover and her brother despite the fact that he was powerless to avert their awful destiny. The tragedy that occurred in Nevyn's youth was more the result of the unreasonable attitudes of his father and other noblemen of his time, the unusual bond of love between his betrothed lover and her brother, and Nevyn's inevitable talent for the dweomer, but at no time does Nevyn seek to make excuses, or shift blame to others. (Neither does he at any time in the novel, however, imagine what his proper course of action could have been.) Cullyn also takes full personal responsibility for the dishonor that leads to his banishment and life as a silver dagger. Even when his story is finally told, it is hard to imagine what he could have done differently.

This treatment of the noble nature of responsibility is consistent with the concept of inevitable destiny, for which Kerr uses the term "wyrd," a common feature in fantasy fiction. Each character has a destiny that must be fulfilled, and each must learn what it is and how to work toward it instead of against it. This concept is consistent with a medieval society with distinct class differences and strict limits to upward mobility.

Daggerspell also features dozens of memorable minor characters, primarily in the courts of the various noblemen, but also occasionally among the lower classes of servants, peasants and merchants. Without this level of detail in characterization, the complex plots and numerous characters would not be accessible to most adult readers, and certainly not young adult readers.

The only characters that are not fully realized in the novel are the evil masters of the dweomer, who lurk at the fringes of society, out of fear of the good and honorable practitioners of dweomer, such as Nevyn.



The novel also includes other imaginary races of beings often used in Celtic fantasies, including elves (a sub-race hated by humans but able to interbreed with them) and dwarves or trolls (who often live among humans undetected). Dragons, which are mentioned in *Daggerspell*, appear in later novels in the series. Practitioners of dweomer can live for centuries. The novel uses reincarnation as a motif, with the souls of each of the major characters reappearing in different generations and subconsciously affecting both the demeanor and destiny of their subsequent incarnations, the identity of which are detectable only by the most talented and skilled practitioners of magic.

Two elements almost totally missing from the novel are religion and science/technology. Both of these are replaced by magic and the feudal social system of Deverryn society. Indeed, none of the characters, even the ancient and learned Nevyn, ever really seek to change the basic concepts of their society, or seek social or technological progress in any way. This is a common aspect of medieval fantasy fiction.

The author's personal background in the civil rights and feminist movements clearly influenced her characterizations. All of the positive characters demonstrate a tolerance and respect for women and those different from oneself, a very uncharacteristic trait for actual medieval societies.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Nevyn's father believe that he must disown and exile him? What could Nevyn have done to avoid this tragedy?
2. What are the chief characteristics of the system of personal honor to which the noblemen of Devery subscribe? Which of these characteristics and beliefs have been abandoned today?
3. How does the belief in destiny, or wyrd, affect the characters?
4. How does the author convey the concept of romantic love? Do you believe that love is a matter of destiny, or does it involve something more personal?
5. How does Devery's social system differ from ours? What aspects are similar to ours? What aspects differ greatly from our modern society?
6. How do the various characters in the book accept personal responsibility for their actions?
7. How do the roles of women differ in medieval society compared to today?
8. What difference might it have made in Devery society if people could read and write, and books were widely available?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What past and current religions and philosophies believed in the concept of destiny, as opposed to free will?
2. Compare and contrast medieval society and modern society in terms of personal freedoms and attitudes toward people of differing social or economic status.
3. Contrast the roles and attitudes toward women in Deverry society with those of modern western society.
4. Which aspects of the novel were true to the actual history of medieval Europe, and which aspects are fantasy elements invented by the author?
5. Write an historical overview of feudalism in medieval Europe. Why did feudalism persist for so many centuries?

What changes finally led to the decline and fall of feudalism?

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Related Titles

Daggerspell was the first novel published in Katharine Kerr's widely-acclaimed series of historical fantasy novels set in the imaginary kingdom of Deverry. Eight novels in the series have been published to date, with four more planned. The first four novels in the series (Daggerspell, Darkspell, The Bristling Wood, and The Dragon Revenant) can be grouped together as the Kingdom of Deverry sequence, while the next four books (A Time of Exile, A Time of Omens, Days of Blood and Fire, and Days of Air and Darkness) represent a separate Westlands Cycle. A third cycle of four novels is now being written, according to the author. These four novels, to be called The Books of Dragon Lore, will complete the Deverry sequence of novels.



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