



The Wild Swans

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This novel focuses on two outcasts on two journeys in two eras. In 1689 England, Lady Eliza Grey's 11 brothers are turned into swans. Rejected by her father, Eliza is flown to America by her brothers where she has a chance to save them--until she is accused of witchcraft. In the second story, set in 1981 New York, Elias Latham has AIDS, is banished from his father's house, and must learn to live on the streets. Like Eliza, Elias struggles to understand the suffering he must endure.

The Wild Swans Details

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Alaya says

The book follows two separate stories: a retelling of Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale about the twelve brothers turned into swans and their long-suffering sister and rescuer, and a love story set in the beginning years of the HIV epidemic in America. As other reviewed have written, I bought the book for the fairy tale, finished it for the love story, and was ultimately unsatisfied with the connections between them. The author's attempts to create parallelism in plot elements, names, and tone felt clunky and distracting, and I don't feel I really understood the connections she was attempting to make in terms of themes and emotional content. The love story would have made a lovely book on its own.

Ryan says

A good story, and interesting retelling of the Six Swans pieced together with the tale of men who began to die needlessly in the early 1980s of a mysterious disease that, at first, seemed only to strike gay men.

I enjoyed the retelling - there are 11 brothers, and they are disowned by their father as traitors, then cursed to be swans by their stepmother (who is satisfyingly horrid). Eliza is cast out for speaking on their behalf. When she finds her brothers, they strike out for the New World to find a better life, and it is there that Eliza discovers the way to save them. At one point, the youngest brother tells Eliza how ashamed he feels, how separate from man and God, how deeply he feels this is a curse.

The story of Elias was good but sad, for many reasons. I was aware of the AIDS epidemic and angry about how it got so bad so quickly - how the disease was ignored because of the victims, how it was misunderstood, how so many suffered horrible deaths - but it was still very distant. Elias' story made it much more personal, gave me a small glimpse of the way things worked then. Elias has to come to terms with being gay in a world where that is still not accepted, without family, and in a world where the people who accept him are dying.

The two stories are pieced together like a quilt - not woven. The pieces are different but they are part of the same thing. Elias learns that there isn't anything shameful about being gay; the swans feel their curse is a shameful condition. Silence nearly costs Eliza her life; silence costs the lives of thousands of people. Fear and misunderstanding tear apart a family, a community in both stories. There is some suggestion of a family relationship - Elias' last name is Latham, and Eliza marries a Jonathan Latham after her brothers fly her to the New World to find a better life. It is hard to describe exactly how they fit, but they do.

Andee Browne says

I pulled this book off a library stack on a whim; it was by an author I'd never heard of and I didn't expect much from it; instead I found myself moved almost to tears by the end both by Eliza's familiar (I was a big fan of Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tales as a kid) yet still compelling story and its counterpart set in somewhat more contemporary times, when a young man exiled from his former life finds family, friends and love within the early 1980s gay subculture of New York, only to contend with slowly losing said family,

friends and love to a curse as grave and costly as the one set on Eliza's brothers.

Elias' chapters are somewhat better than Eliza's due to richer characterizations (Most of her brothers are only mentioned in passing and by name if extremely lucky; Elias and Sean's clique of friends fare much better in the development/personality departments) and some attempts to bridge the two stories come off a wee bit hamhanded, which keeps this book at four stars instead of five. Still an excellent read for anyone who loves a tragic love story.

Julia says

What an **amazing** book! Set in two time periods, England and New England in 1689 Eliza's stepmother has turned her eleven brothers into swans. In New York City in the early 1980's, Elias is rescued from living on the street after his parents kick him out of their house for being gay by Sean, a musician and writer. In both time periods the protagonists must build lives for themselves, save their brothers, and themselves. It tells a similar story to the Sevenwaters Trilogy, but that was set in sometimes Pagan, sometimes Christian Ireland and England. It was a more superstitious time. When Eliza is accused of witchcraft and can not speak in her own defense in Puritan New England, things get dire. Elias and his friends cannot expect magical help. The author says in the note at the end that a central theme of the book came to her as a bus lumbered by with "Silence = Death" on its side.

Daughter of the Forest

Elsiekate says

one of my favorite books--i've bought copies for friends i thought should read it. two narratives--a retelling of a grim, though i don't recall if it's a grimm, fairy tale parallels a young man's experiences in new york in the early days of the gay community grappling with AIDS. i haven't reread it for a few years, but i recall there being several times when i was crying as read, but being so glad that i did. i think that it may resonate more for me, going to college as AIDS began and losing so many people who i went to school with, but i think that's a booster, not a necessity, to appreciating this book.

Lisa says

This is one of those books that could only have emerged out of the 90s as it ran a re-telling of a fairy tale parallel with an exploration of homosexual identity and love during the advent of the AIDS epidemic. Such a strange juxtaposition and yet the interstices it creates are far greater than a fairy tale or a simple chronicle of how gay men moved as the AIDS epidemic bloomed.

The shame of 11 men whose bodies are taken captive by an evil spell each day at sunrise runs alongside the shame of a gay boy whose parents refuse to accept his sexual preferences. The speechless misunderstood sister is persecuted and condemned even as she works self-sacrificially to save her brothers. And those who help their dying friends are ostracized, they lose their jobs and they are condemned.

Monique says

This was a bit of a surprise. I started this book expecting a straightforward retelling of a fairy tale, but it was a bit more than that. While Eliza's tale certainly is what I expected, Elias's story was quite different. I don't want to spoil too much, but suffice it to say that it was more poignant and much deeper than I expected.

All in all, I thought this book was really good. I enjoyed the way the different tales were interwoven. Miles apart at first, they slowly moved towards one another. While some of the parallels were a bit too much for me (such as the writer using the exact same descriptions for Eliza and Lizzie), most of them worked really well. The only thing that really bothered me, was Kerr's way of speeding up the narrative at times. This caused her to skip certain events that I would've liked to see in more detail. Less isn't always more... but apart from that, this book is excellent and I really recommend it.

Elizabeth Singleton says

While I love Eliza's story (and practically any other retelling of the swans), I really feel like Elias' story should have been more about finding acceptance and love than being doomed with an incurable disease. I get it. That disease was *the* issue of the 80s and 90s. It's still an issue today, it's just not a purely gay issue and the book makes it seem that way.

I only gave three stars because unlike others I HATE the fact that it alternated chapters between then and now. It makes NO SENSE to overlap these two stories and while I would've loved to have read both stories, one at a time would make so much more sense in this instance. I like other parallel story books so it's not that, it's just that I feel that these two books are so dissimilar.

Lis Carey says

Kerr tells two stories in alternating chapters, the story of Eliza, in the seventeenth century, whose stepmother has enchanted her eleven brothers so that they are swans by day and men only by night, and the story of Elias, in the early eighties in New York, whose parents have kicked him out. They're both interesting, compelling stories, and I enjoyed both them. I don't, though, see the close parallels between them that Kerr says in an afterword motivated her, beyond a rather tenuous theme of "what's family". The motivations of the parental units are different, their actions are different, the responses of Eliza and Elias are different, and the outcomes are different. One is severely let down by adopted family; every important member of the other's adopted family stands firm. One succeeds in defeating the evil that oppresses them; the other can only defeat it in spirit. One story is fantasy; the other is mainstream mimetic fiction.

On the other hand, each contains an obvious mistake about an easily checked background detail. (Witches were not burned alive in England; Catholic priests released from their vows retain the power to perform the sacraments.)

I have one additional complaint about Elias' story. There's someone at the beginning who helps him survive his first days on the streets, and tries to teach him survival skills for living in the streets. When Elias gets a chance to get off the streets, he quite rightly jumps at it. From the point of view of that first person to befriend him, though, he must have seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth, in circumstances where his having gotten killed would not be out of the question. When Eliza walks away from the people who know her, some of whom care about her, she has a compelling reason for not attempting any contact with them again, at least until after the end of the story. Elias, though, had some options for at least attempting to get word to his street friend that he didn't die bleeding in an alley, even if he didn't want to make direct contact--a personal ad, for instance. As far as the reader can tell from the text of the story, though, Elias never thinks about that person again, once his luck changes.

But I repeat that these are both good stories, and I enjoyed both of them. Kerr does a good job of making the reader care about each of her protagonists, and the problems that confront them.

Kim says

Like Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*, this book uses a fairy tale to discuss serious modern issues, in this case homophobia and living with AIDS. The book is made up of two stories told in alternating chapters: the story of Eliza, which takes place in the 17th century and follows the original Wild Swans fairy tale, and the story of Elias, which takes place in the '80s. When Elias comes out to his parents, he is thrown out on the streets, and ends up contracting AIDS. Although I love the original fairy tale in all its variants, I was surprised to find Elias's story more compelling than Eliza's, although the 17th century language might have something to do with that. It is difficult to see how the stories fit together until the very end, which I've read over and over again because it's so sad and so lovely. You'll need your hankies for this one!

Kathy says

Overall, this book in its entirety didn't touch me.

However, the two stories, told in alternating chapters, did. I enjoyed reading both Eliza's story (based on Hans Christian Andersen's "The wild swans") from the 1600s and Elias' story from the 1980s. The story of the early days of the AIDS epidemic were particularly moving; I am of the age that I was in my 20s-30s during that decade and remember what a death sentence AIDS was to so many of our generation. I remember the fear many heterosexuals had of catching this disease, too. I also remember that families were being torn apart over not only the disease, but the fact that loved ones were coming out.

Thank goodness, I haven't had to face losing any friends or family to AIDS. I do know what it's like to have friends and family "come out" and I'm still amazed how some families can turn their backs on the very people they've loved for years. This book reminds us how hurtful that can be.

The ending of the book, however, doesn't feel right. Although the author attempts to pull the two stories together, there's too little explanation. Well, no explanation, actually. How can the people involved in both stories co-exist finally?

Ah, well, it may be I'm too dense. But I do think the book has something to offer; just don't expect a nice

little wrap-up. The two individual stories ended well-enough; I just didn't like the combined ending.

Kerith says

A find, a buried treasure, a true beauty of a gem. I simply could not stop reading this book.

Kerr tells two stories side by side. One is a very true retelling of Andersen's fairy tale of the same name -- mostly set in Colonial America (beginning in England). The other is an early 80s "fairy" tale of a young gay man coming out to the world at the beginning of the AIDS discovery. Each story barely overlaps, yet displays subtle similarities that keep you wondering when they will meet each other. The characters are precious, and I was filled grief and hope throughout, plus anger for the bigotry and fear permeating both times.

Jennifer W says

This book has been on my TBR since I joined goodreads, about 5 years ago. I wasn't sure if I would like it, if it would be too melodramatic or too overdone, but it was wonderful. Elias' and Eliza's stories overlap and are used well to make points about silence and fear. About finding families where you least expect them. Even about loving the people who are eventually going to kill you. I don't really remember the HCA fairy tale of The Wild Swans, but I like the Puritan witchcraft angle of this version. However, sadly, Elias' curse of AIDS is still all too familiar and real. I think the saddest line in the whole book is at the beginning of Chapter 18 "Surely, he thought hopefully, in a country with the best medical system in the world, the cure for AIDS would be found soon." I think that was the point I was most deeply lost in the book, because I found myself shaking my head and saying, you poor fool, 30 years after you were thinking this, they still haven't found a cure. Of course, the author (writing this 15 years ago) knew it was a hopeless thought, too, but to me, it was Elias making that statement.

I think what made this an enjoyable summer read was that it was part fairy tale. Even when I knew the characters were doomed, even when I could barely keep reading because I didn't want to experience the pain and loss that I knew was coming, I kept at it because in fairy tales, there is always hope.

Macpudel says

I didn't read the cover blurb very carefully when I picked this one up. I was more captivated by the historical setting and the fairy tale. So - no time travel romance here between gay Elias and Eliza of the bespelled brothers. Elias' story is tragic, and the story of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s needs to be told more, as it devastated a generation of gay men and hemophiliacs. However, it has very little to do with the tale of Eliza and her brothers which is more of a retelling of a classic fairy tale plugged into Puritan New England.

Melanti says

I much preferred the modern story of Elias to that of puritan New England Eliza.

Eliza's half of the story just felt a bit flat for me. I just didn't feel I knew her and the people around her as well as I should. The typical fairy tale ending at the end of her part feels forced because of it. I know *I* certainly wouldn't immediately forgive someone who came minutes from hanging me!

However, what Eliza's story was good at was drawing attention to the bits of Elias's story that were thematically important. While the stories were completely independent in plot (other than a few hints of reincarnation), the shared threads did link them together sufficiently.

Linking the stories reinforced the idea of hiding -living radically different and completely separate lives by night as you do by day, the idea of persecution by people not quite the same as you, and that of silence - a lack of talking that makes situations worse.

While it's not the best written book by any means, it brings up some thought provoking topics, and I found the modern half of the story very touching.
