



The Seventh Swan

Nicholas Stuart Gray

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The background of this tale of adventure is 16th century Scotland, in the Highlands of the clan feuds and cattle-reiving days, and it has a sinister undertone of witchcraft and sorcery. Most of us are familiar with Hans Christian Anderson's great story, The Wild Swans, but how many have wondered what happened to the youngest, the one whose shirt was not finished, the one who, even when he became a man again, was left with a swan's wing? This is, in effect, the story of the youngest swan, of the girl who went to the gates of death to help him, of the mercenary soldier who loved them both, and other exploits and battles.

This edition was published as #3 in the MagicQuest series by Ace Books, a reissuing of classic young adult fantasy novels.

The Seventh Swan Details

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Author : Nicholas Stuart Gray

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From Reader Review The Seventh Swan for online ebook

Kathy says

My favourite of all Nicholas Stuart Gray's novels but only four stars as it suffers from an unnecessarily convoluted plot. Keep at it! Most of his stories began as plays and all display his love of romance and virtue and cute fairy tales requiring true heroism to win through.

The Seventh Swan's secondary character, Ewen, steals the show and at one stage nearly gets the princess who really is lovely. I defy you to read this book without crying.

Ariel says

A fantasy adventure about an enchanted boy who pities himself overmuch, set in fairytale Scotland. Shot through with moonlight magic as one might expect from the author of GRIMBOLD'S OTHER WORLD, one of my favorite childhood reads.

Kathryn says

What little I remember of this book was...oddly unsatisfying. It started with a great premise: after the fairy tale of "The Seven Swans" ended, whatever happened to the one prince who's shirt wasn't finished? He wound up with a swan's wing instead of an arm, but nothing more was ever said about him.

Well the book tries to answer this, but it fell flat because I just couldn't care about the characters. The prince with the swan's wing was bitter and miserable and kind of a whiner through the whole book. There were odd anachronisms scattered throughout (the guns in particular didn't seem to fit in a feudal society), and there were some political and magical machinations that I just couldn't grasp. AND the cover art is wrong; it was the prince's RIGHT arm that was a swan's wing, which kept him from becoming a proper swordsman, which gave him something ELSE to whine about.

Good idea for a book, just not a great execution. I'd love to read someone else's interpretation of the fairy tale, just to see if it's possible to do a better job.

Mary says

I love books that are retelling of fairy tales and the variations on the swan stories are among my favorites. "The Seventh Swan" takes the end of the story as its jumping off point. Set in the highlands of Scotland in the late 1600's (another point in its favor for me), the author asks what happened to the brother whose wing was not completely transformed? His sister, now happily married and talking, decides to seek help for him. But something happens as the story goes on. The characters develop and we come to care for them--the young Scottish woman who wants to help the swan-boy and the mercenary soldier who has been his companion/guard. Questions of love and sacrifice come to the fore. Who is the real hero of the story?

Perhaps the ending is unexpected; some readers might find it unsatisfactory. But it has haunted my memory for many years.

Jennifer Heise says

Good premise-- what happened to the last swan-boy who was left with a wing? But I spent the whole book wanting to slap him for being so self-pitying; I guess it takes one to know one, right?

I kept the book because it's part of the MagicQuest series and almost all the other ones in the series are amazing.

Tracey says

From the old standby, Wikipedia: "Neil Gaiman has written that [Nicholas Stuart] Gray 'is one of those authors I loved as a boy who holds up even better on rereading as an adult'."

This is such a perfect quote - it's wonderfully true. Given some of the events in Susan Dexter's *The True Knight*, I thought of Nicholas Stuart Gray's *The Seventh Swan*, and pulled it off the shelf.

Wow.

The book uses one of my favorite devices: it takes a well-known story, in this case a fairy tale, and pushes it out further. The original story is "The Six Swans" (not seven?), in which an evil step-mother turns her husband's six sons into birds. Their sister can restore them, but the only way is to weave shirts for them out of nettles (or something similar), and cannot speak (or smile, possibly) until they're complete. A neighboring king finds her in the midst of the task, falls in love with her, and marries her, and she keeps on weaving, even when the people decide she must be a witch and go to burn her at the stake. She keeps weaving, even managing to retain her hold on her work when they boost her onto the pyre. The good folk are about to light the kindling when the swan brothers arrive, and she throws the shirts out onto them - but the last one is incomplete, and when her youngest brother is restored he is left with one wing.

Gray sets the story in Scotland in perhaps the 18th century, and picks up the thread about two years after the fairy tale ended. The six fully human brothers (there were seven brothers here) are off living their lives - but the seventh, Alasdair, has not done well adjusting to life as a human - and life with one wing. Gray was rather cruel here, making the wing his right arm, rendering him unable to fight without extensive retraining of his off hand. (The cover artist, Carl Lundgren, not only gets this wrong, but shows Alasdair with a sword in his hand. I don't think Lundgren is usually that bad, but this is a classic case of *Illustrator Did Not Read the Manuscript*.) Alasdair lives with his courageous sister Agnes, married to the chief of Kinrowan, who is a sisterly cross between exasperated and horribly worried for him; his interpersonal skills are almost nil, and every time he hears swans fly over he breaks. He is filled with self-pity and self-loathing both, and his only wish is that his sister had not transformed him. He was free as a swan, and was happy so for almost twenty years - humanity holds nothing for him. His mercenary henchman, Ewen, is a kind of crusty mother hen to him, but has no better luck reaching him.

It was strange how reading this straight after *True Knight* made for confusion with the names; in TK the swan-lad was Even, so I continually had to stop and regroup reading about the swan-lad Alasdair and his

mercenary Ewen.

Agnes knows he needs to be snapped out of it, and has a plan. A neighboring chief and his daughter Fenella are visiting, and Fenella is lovely, kind, and gentle ... just what he needs, thinks Agnes. As the book opens, Alasdair is maneuvered into dancing with her - only to stop dead in the middle of it as he hears wild swans in the air. He runs off, leaving her there and making it obvious that love at first sight isn't going to be the saving grace in this story. Alasdair isn't going to be that easy to fix.

Nothing is that easy for the characters in this story. An evil hobgoblin, a missing witch, a cattle thief, and a mysterious bard all factor into an increasingly elaborate plan to force Alasdair into growing up and accepting his loss of flight. I thought I had an idea of how it might turn out - and (no great surprise) I was utterly wrong. And shocked. Although the tone throughout the story is light and often funny, this has a surprisingly adult ending for something specifically marketed as a children's/young adult book - not adult in terms of violence or sex, but gravity. Put it this way: the bard, Hudart, foretells something ominous - and he's right.

And, perversely, that makes the book even better. If it had had the light and fluffy happy ending I expected, I'd look back on *The Seventh Swan* fondly and forget about it before too long. Instead, though, it's going to be with me for a while. Beautiful characterizations, beautiful writing with a better feel for Scotland than any of those Highland romances that keep multiplying like tribbles out there, and a beautifully told story: Neil Gaiman was absolutely right. I need to find more of Gray's work - it's extraordinary.

robyn says

Once upon a time... seven brothers were doomed to fly as wild swans during the day, and return to their natural form at night. They were saved by their sister, who wove shirts out of stinging nettles, but was unable to finish one sleeve of the last shirt, and so the youngest brother was left with a swan's wing. End of story. Except for the youngest brother, of course.

This is a children's story, but with an adult sense of consequences and prices to be paid. I was young when I read it, and it was the first small story (Lord of the Rings being something on quite another level) to leave me with a sense of the bittersweetness of a proper ending.

The Fairy Godmother says

Based on *The Wild Swans*.

Catmagic says

I remember this as enchanting...and by the way so was most of the rest of the MagicQuest series, which was where this book got its 1980's American publication from. I see that some people are forgetting to mention that the book is actually based on a combination of stories, not just one. Grimm's *The Six Swans*, Andersen's *The Wild Swans*, and Grimm's *The Seven Ravens* were all strongly featured early in the book, and various bits and pieces of other stories made cameo appearances whenever it was convenient for them. (By the way if anyone is familiar with house-elves...there is one here...and a more traditional one than in Harry Potter.

The house-elf, or house-brownie, was originally the guardian spirit of the house...usually only one per house, and usually not enslaved or in enforced servitude...although some of them were involuntarily bound to the house, especially the ones who were really ghosts.)

The (Scottish) author has reset the story in Scotland, which adds to the enchantment...picking up a few bits of Scottish folklore and tradition along the way (house-brownies are often found in England and Scotland). One of my favorite parts of this was the retelling/recapping of the traditional swan story/stories near the beginning of the book. Although I suppose really the purpose of this is (a) to familiarize readers with the story if they're not familiar with it already and (b) to give Fenella a clue as to why Alasdair behaves strangely and rushes away every time he hears swans fly over...what I loved about it was that it was just beautifully told and sets the stage for the rest of the book. Here is where the magic sparkles...here is where we know that this is a fairy tale and not just a strange psychological drama/trauma...and here is where we believe that in the Scottish Highlands of a few centuries ago, anything can happen, including magic. Seven brothers turned to swans? Why not? We seem to have been transported to a land where anything is possible and everything is real...and yet nothing seems particularly unrealistic. This is the master storyteller's gift of asking, What if it could really happen? and pulling readers/listeners into a world where...just maybe, it could.

Nikki says

This book had an interesting idea. The story of the seven swans, and one at the end who still has a swan's arm... I can't remember any origin or location for this story, originally, but it's interesting that this version seems to be set in Scotland. It's odd, though, because there's a very feudal system, with clan wars and sieges and so on, but as well as swords there are guns... It seems a little anachronistic, although, heh -- I never got on well with history, certainly not with the little details like this.

Alasdair is intriguing at first, since you don't really understand what's wrong with him, but he gets wearing a little later on, with his whining and his constant complaints about his wing. It's understandable characterisation, but it doesn't make good reading.

Also, Fenella's little plot -- and the way everyone treat him -- as if he's supposed to think that people won't mind the fact that he has a wing. Come on, be realistic. People mind. You don't have to have something as strange as that to be made into a pariah. His own behaviour doesn't help, of course, but...

The idea was more enchanting than the execution. The characters could have been interesting -- like Ewen, in particular -- but he was so mercurial and strange at first that I had no idea how he felt, whether he really cared about Alasdair or not. The idea kept my attention rather better than any of the other components of the book. Even Fenella -- why *should* she be any different to anyone else in her reactions to Alasdair? That didn't seem to be explained.

Joy Everafter says

The traditional fairy story ended with the mute Queen succeeding in freeing her brothers from their swan forms by throwing them the nettle shirts she had made with her bare hands. Because she had been condemned to die, she could wait no longer, so the last brother's shirt was unfinished and he was left with a

swan's wing forever. Of course this showed she had been virtuous all along and everyone lived happily ever after.

Mr Gray is the only one who worries about the fate of that seventh, youngest, brother, who was only a little boy when he turned into a swan, and now has to make his life as a youth in a world where he is viewed as deformed. The ever-romantic Mr Gray brings him a sweetheart, the beautiful, brave Fenella who undergoes horrific trials to try to heal him, and a grim bodyguard who shows him what real suffering is.

A heart-wrenching, uplifting read.

Melissa says

I fell in love with the Wild Swans story through Juliet Marillier's *The Daughter of the Forest*, so I was excited to find this book detailing what happens to the one-winged brother afterwards. I really really wanted to like this one. Alas, it had an amazing premise, but unfortunate execution.

First of all, at no point did I feel affection for Alasdair. His social anxiety seemed like such a shallow plot point compared to what could have been focused on. What about the fact that he was only 3 years old when he was cursed, and lived the next 17 and more as a swan? Does he even know how to be human after all this time? Basically, I wanted Marillier's thoughtful Finbar instead of whiny Alasdair, whose defining characteristic is that he's "outrageously handsome."

Still, I tried to set my preconceptions aside, and for a while I thought the mercenary Ewen showed some promise. Indeed, his was the most interesting character. With a bit more fleshing out, his story arc could have made for a more interesting read by itself. However, I couldn't bring myself to care for the other "main" characters and ended up dissatisfied.

Kate Forsyth says

Oh I loved this book so much! Nicholas Stuart Gray is truly a magical writer. I loved his books as a child and I think I love him even more as an adult, because he writes in such an effortlessly enchanting way, and I know now just how difficult that is. I've wanted to read this book for many years and at last ordered it over the internet – I'm so glad I did. It makes me want to track down more of his books.

Thomas says

This is one of my favorite books of my youth. I recall reading it over and over more than any other book in my collection. There's something about the main heroine that's endearing and sweet, which the world she inhabits is dark. The balance of the two reads nicely, which the "seventh swan" has a nature that's both unlikable and yet not unattractive.

However, I tried reading it as an adult a few years ago and couldn't quite make it through the entire thing. I loved it years ago, but don't care for it as much as an adult.

Arlene Allen says

I loved this absolutely wrenching re-telling of the Wild Swans/Seventh Swan. This was part of a wonderful fantasy series primarily aimed at teens in the early 1980s - back when teen fantasy was more than chaste vampires and boys in magic schools.
