



## A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories

*Robin McKinley*

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## **A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories** Robin McKinley

1 Lily. She has the power to heal, but no speech - until a mage hears words from her mind.

2 Ruen. The princess was abandoned by her uncle deep in a cave to die at the hands of a stagman - who will surprise fate.

3 Erana. Given as a babe to a witch, raised beside the witch's troll son, she learns love comes in many forms.

4 Coral. The lovely newcomer consents to marry an older widower who soon wonders why she wants to live at Butter Hill Farm.

5 Annabelle. In the attic of their new house, the teen finds a knot that leads her on a magical mission.

## **A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories Details**

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Author : Robin McKinley

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## From Reader Review A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories for online ebook

### Suzi says

YES, Robin McKinley. A buddy was rereading her books and so I glanced on Hoopla, picked this one (had never read it before) and was NOT DISAPPOINTED. A short book of wonderfully smart fantasy short stories. Now must reread everything!

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### Azka says

I think i am..... underwhelmed.

I have never read anything by Robin Mckinley before but i have heard a lot of praise, so i had high hopes of liking this collection of short stories. But i didn't.

The short stories are not exactly bad, but they are not remember able either. They didn't leave a lasting impression.

"The Stagman" was the only story i was excited to read. Other than that, i wasn't impressed.

But i do plan to read The Blue Sword sometime. \*fingers crossed\*

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### Shauna says

I have always loved fairy-tales, and I have enjoyed McKinley's various attempts at re-telling both some old beloved and forgotten ones. I enjoyed more, however, these original tales by McKinley. She has a lovely facility for creating worlds of fantasy and wonder, and I especially enjoyed revisiting an old friend, Luthe, the mage, in a couple of these stories. I was especially taken by the last, title, story that was set in a modern world. I was so caught up in the set up of the story that I dismayed at the quickly diminishing number of pages left in the book. Indeed if I have one recurring complaint about McKinley's stories, it is that they sometimes end too soon and abruptly.

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### Debbie says

This book is a short story collection of Middle Grade fantasy stories. I enjoyed Robin McKinley's novels set in Damar ("The Blue Sword" and "The Hero and the Crown") so I bought this book hoping to learn more about Damar. Two of the stories were set in Damar, but you won't know it from any other generic fantasy world if Luthe (a character from the novels) didn't briefly appear in them. We don't learn anything new about him, either.

Most of the stories follow the plot line of: a character has a problem, magic help comes along, the problem is fixed. The heroine generally doesn't have a difficult obstacle to overcome so much as a decision to make.

I felt like needed information was missing in some of the stories. The heroine in "The Stagman" was very passive, and the characters' weren't developed (or their motives really explained). "The Healer" was

interesting and had a developed setting and characters, but I felt like too many things were left unresolved at the end. I've never really understood the magic part of "The Knot in the Grain."

"Buttercups" started well, but the conflict resolved too quickly and easily. "Touk's House" was the best written of the five: it had some conflict as well as good setting and character development. And it resolved everything at the end.

There was a minor amount of explicit bad language. There were no sex scenes. Overall, the stories were a mixed bag. Robin McKinley's fans might enjoy reading these stories, but I wouldn't recommend buying the book.

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## Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

Full review first posted on [www.FantasyLiterature.com](http://www.FantasyLiterature.com):

I'm not sure if I bought this fantasy short story collection by Robin McKinley when I first saw it in the mid-1990s because McKinley was one of my favorite fantasy authors or because I was entranced by the cover art on the paperback, with the colorful contrast between the girl in a brilliant sapphire dress and the bright gold background of buttercups. Actually, at that time I was pretty much automatically buying everything McKinley wrote. Regardless, I very much enjoyed the collection of five fantasy short stories, and have reread them several times since. These tales are set in different lands and, for the most part, different worlds, but they are bound together by the fantasy element and their young women protagonists. As a whole, I rate this collection 4 stars, but I've given each story its own rating below.

"Healer" is set in same fantasy world as Damar, the desert land explored more deeply in *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown*. Lily, a gifted healer apprentice, has been mute since birth, and feels some bitterness toward her inability to communicate. When she is twenty, she meets Sahath, a jaded wizard who has lost almost all of his powers, but retains the ability to mindspeak. Lily is entranced with him, the first person she has ever been able to truly communicate with, although her teacher and friend Jolin fears him:

What, she asked herself in fear, might this man do to her, in her innocence, her pleasure in the opening of a door so long closed to her, and open now only to this stranger? Mages were not to be trusted on a human scale of right and wrong, reason and unreason. Mages were sworn to other things. Jolin understood that they were sworn to ? goodness, to rightness; but often that goodness was of a high, far sort that looked very much like misery to the smaller folk who had to live near it.

When Sahath offers to take Lily to his old master, the great mage, to see if he can give Lily her voice, all three ? Jolin, Lily and Sahath ? must face their fears.

The quiet pace of this story fits its subject matter; not just Lily's physical silence, but also Sahath's slowly learning to love and hope again. For readers who love the character of Luthe and the world of Damar, it's also a pleasure to revisit them again, however briefly. 3.5 stars.

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In "The Stagman," the princess Ruen has been raised in the shadow of her uncle, who became Regent over their kingdom when Ruen's parents died. Her uncle is a man who has grasped power and does not wish to relinquish it to Ruen. So he isolates her, with no friends or family or even servants that she can rely on, and sees to it that she is given only instructions and lessons that are too difficult to comprehend. Ruen grows up

passive, dazed and inadequate.

On Ruen's name day when she is supposed to be named queen, her uncle announces that magical portents warn against it. Instead Ruen is left chained to stones outside the city, to die as a human sacrifice to the half-man, half-beast monster that lately has been sighted in the kingdom. What happens thereafter that is not at all what either Ruen or her uncle had expected.

"The Stagman," like "Healer," is set in the world of Damar: Luthe once again makes a brief but critical appearance in the tale. The titular stagman is a mysterious shapeshifter that Ruen meets at a couple of key points in her life. Ruen's name is indicative of her bittersweet life; she's a solemn character who floats along letting other make decisions for her, and her passivity and emotional isolation makes her difficult to empathize with. Ruen remains passive until the very end, when she suddenly makes an understandable but controversial choice. 2 stars.

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"Touk's House" is a variant on the Rapunzel fairy tale: a woodcutter's youngest daughter falls ill, and the local doctor suggests that an herb from a nearby witch's garden might heal her. In desperation, the woodcutter steals the herb, is caught by the witch, and given the herb (a different one than the one he was trying to steal) that will heal his daughter. But in return he is forced to give the witch his wife's unborn child, their fifth daughter. At this point the tale veers off in a somewhat different direction: the witch Maugie raises baby Erana with love and teaches her the healing arts, and Maugie's son Touk, half-troll with green skin and fangs, falls in love with Erana as she grows older. But Erana has to follow her own path first to decide what she wants in life.

This is another quiet tale, simply told, but with some unexpected insights into the various forms that love may take, and showing that winning a kingdom and the hand of a handsome prince might not be the optimal place to find personal happiness and peace. 3.5 stars.

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Perhaps appropriately because of my cover love for this book, my favorite story in this collection is "Buttercups." Pos, an older widowed farmer, sees a chestnut-haired young woman at the market each week and falls in love. Awkwardly, he begins to court her, hardly believing that she can be interested in a man twenty years older than she. But Coral treats him with great affection, and agrees to be his wife when he eventually asks her. Transcendently blissful at first, Pos soon discovers two holes in the weave of his happiness: First, he overhears a servant's spiteful gossip that Coral only married him to get away from her family's poverty. The second is a troublesome hillock on his farm that stubbornly refuses to be cultivated and will grow only buttercups. When Pos and Coral discover that their horses' shoes temporarily turn to gold when they ride their horses on Buttercup Hill, Pos begins to think that his second dilemma might be the answer to his first. He decides to try taking the horseshoes off the horse while they are gold, hoping that they'll then remain gold, and thinking that Coral might be more content to stay if he is a richer man. But the wild magic of Buttercup Hill reacts in a way Pos never expected, and suddenly he has other major troubles to deal with.

In "Buttercups," magic touches ordinary lives in a fascinating way. The interplay between the magical events and the characters' lives, and the understanding Pos gains not only about Coral, but about his own heart and the need for honest communication, make this a wonderful moral tale as well as an unusual fantasy. 5 stars.

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The final story, "A Knot in the Grain," is set in our modern world, with just a touch of magic. High school

junior Annabelle has moved with her family to a new town, and Annabelle is feeling rather lost and adrift as the new kid in town, missing her old friends, and wanting to make new friends but feeling too shy and awkward to do so. In her attic bedroom one day, she touches a knot in a wooden beam in the low ceiling, which opens a crack to reveal a narrow set of stairs leading to a tiny hidden room. And in the hidden are shelves, and books, and a mysterious wooden box. The box seems to exude some kind of power, and it somehow seems very anxious to help Annabelle with any problems and concerns in her life.

“A Knot in the Grain” is the most overtly young adult story in this collection, with its teenage main character and her high school concerns, but I still found myself pulled into Annabelle’s world and interested in the outcome. It’s a fairly straightforward magical realism type of tale, but it takes an unexpected and thought-provoking turn in the end. 4 stars.

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These fantasies turn more on the internal lives of their characters than exciting adventures, but their quieter and thoughtful approach has its own appeal. McKinley’s recent works are sometimes frustrating in their lack of clarity and resolution, particularly with her penchant for including nightmarish and incomprehensible magical clashes. These stories from earlier in her career have a refreshing simplicity in comparison, evocative of classic folk and fairy tales.

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### **Ascolta says**

For me this is McKinley at her best; I read these stories with the same level of enjoyment as *Hero and the Crown* and *Blue Sword*. They are also very strong as short fiction, and certain lines are remarkable for their sensitive insight. Only two of the stories are obviously set in Damar, and one seems to take place in modern day N. America, but all were equally enjoyable. One rater described these stories as 'muted' and I agree. This isn't the stuff of high drama, but the tales are wonderfully unpredictable, as is some of the prose.

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### **Katrina says**

Robin McKinley has always been a favorite of mine (*Deerskin* is a book I reread every few years), so when I saw this on sale, I leapt at the opportunity, and I was not disappointed. Every single story I found myself getting hopelessly sucked into. If you enjoy her books you'll enjoy this little collection!

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### **Lora says**

Pretty good writing and clean, too. These were earlier stories that have hints of *Beauty*, *Sunshine*, *Chalice*, and others, all whispering between the lines of these stories. My favorite was *Buttercups*, because of the theme of turning bad into good. Good YA, good fantasy, good short stories, good McKinley.

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### **Margaret says**

I see the word 'quiet' a lot with reviews of this short story collection, and certainly that is an accurate word.

The plots of these stories are often muted, the characters quietly rebelling against expectations.

In "Healer," the protagonist Lily is literally quiet in that she is born mute and has never uttered a word. Yet she rebels against expectations by becoming a successful healer in her village. When she meets a former mage, both are changed.

In "The Stagman," the princess Ruen's voice and freedom is quieted by her uncle when her parents die, and then her choice is taken away by a mage she thought would help her. But again there is a quiet rebellion that occurs, though only after many decades of acquiescence.

"Touk's House" combines many fairy tales. When a father steals an herb from a witch's garden to save one of his daughters, he promises to give his pregnant wife's child to the witch to raise. But unlike Rapunzel, the witch is not cruel, and she raises her child, Eranu, like she would her own, along with her son a half-troll. Both the troll and Eranu are quieted by the way society treats them--the troll as a monster, Eranu as a poor woman incapable of choice.

"Buttercups" also contains fairy tale elements with a fae-flowered field on an otherwise productive farm. When a farmer marries a younger woman, at first they live a happy, productive life together, until the secrets they're hiding from one another threaten their relationship. This story illustrates the power and need of speech in relationships, of not letting the unspoken things come between love.

In "A Knot in the Grain," the final story, 16-year-old Annabelle is forced to move to a new town and home, leaving behind her friends and boyfriend. She's silenced in that she's too young to make decisions in the family, but she's also silenced by her shyness and her unwillingness to make others unhappy. But she finds agency in an unexpected place when she discovers a secret room in her new home. This may be my favorite of the stories.

The title "A Knot in the Grain" speaks for all the stories--the grain is smooth until the knot appears--a choice made, a quiet rebellion.

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### **elissa says**

All of McKinley's stories are good, and this is a nice collection of them.

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### **K.W. McCabe says**

A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories by Robin McKinley 4 out of 5 stars

I just finished reading this collection of short stories by Robin McKinley. Within are included five tales. The first tale: Healer tells the story of Lily, a child born with the magic to heal, but without the gift of speech. Lily, kind and loving, is apprenticed to Jolin to learn the ways of healers. Jolin and Lily become like family to one another, but Lily still feels the loneliness of never finding a love. Then one day a mage named Sahak who has lost his powers comes across Lily and they are able to communicate with each other through mind-speech. Their interactions will teach them about love, courage, and honor. I enjoyed this tale immensely; I'm a sucker for fairy tales and happy endings- and this one filled that perfectly. I give this tale 5 out of 5 stars.

The next tale: The Stagman tells the story of Ruen, an orphan princess mistreated by her uncle. I liked this tale, but the ending drove me to distraction. I couldn't understand (spoilers coming!) why Ruen disappeared- was it because she was unhappy? Did she go back to stay with Luthe and the Stagman? Ambiguous endings like this drive me nuts! I have to give this tale 3 out of 5 stars.

The third tale: Touk's House was a very nice twist on Rapunzel. I enjoyed this tale, although, I couldn't help but feel that Erana ended up making the decision she made because of her bad experience with the prince. I give this tale 3.5 out of 5 stars.

The fourth tale: Buttercups, I truly liked. Pos, an old widowed farmer, meets and falls in love with Coral. The two marry and live happily until Pos overhears one of his workers commenting that he thinks Coral just married him for his wealth. This starts a grain of doubt in Pos who begins to wonder if Coral truly loves him. His doubt causes him to do something that seemingly brings tragedy to their farm, but eventually ends in an ending that reaffirms the love they have for one another. I liked this tale a lot and I give it 5 out of 5 stars.

The fifth and last tale: A Knot in the Grain, is a modern tale. Annabelle and her family move to a small town. Her forays into the attic reveal a box which magically fulfills her wishes. This tale is a warm story of the possibilities of good coming from sad or difficult situations. I give this tale 4 out of 5 stars.

Overall, the collection is a wonderful read- I would recommend it to readers of all ages. I give the whole collection 4 out of 5 stars.

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### **Nikki says**

I've always loved fairytale retellings, and I really like what McKinley does with fairytales, whether she's making them up or bending them to suit her own stories. This little collection is no different: I'm told the stories are set in the world of some of her novels, Damar, but to be honest I rather preferred them to the Damar novels. I couldn't say why, but...

They're all rather quiet stories, mostly people living in a world with magic where it's really best if that magic doesn't touch them, and when it does, they have to live with it. The first story reminded me of Ursula Le Guin's writing, too, which is always gonna be a good thing. That and the fourth were my favourites, I think.

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### **Alethea says**

Reading Robin McKinley's blog, as I do, has given me a rather acute sensitivity to her prose style. In the case of this book, this is actually rather an asset, as it renders the prose nearly transparent, letting me appreciate the stories more than I think I did when I first read them fifteen years ago. I do still get a little irritated with Luthe's tendency to show up and solve everyone's problems--it might not be so conspicuous if it didn't occur in two successive stories--but the entire book is redeemed for me by the wonderful ending of the final story. To have a teen girl, uprooted by a move, discover and use a powerful and deeply mysterious magic to save her new town from development, and then set that magic firmly aside so that she might live a normal life...what a wonderfully unconventional story. And how utterly delightful. I love it.

The characters are of course the main attraction here for me--the middle aged farmer and his lovely young wife in "Buttercups", the mute healer Lily in the first story, and of course Annabelle in "A Knot in the

Grain." The other two stories are more overtly fairy-tale, with somewhat less engaging characters; the stories are fairy tales, rather than being tales of the numinous breaking in on otherwise normal people with their lives and preoccupations. Even a McKinley story that I don't adore, however, is a good use of my time.

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### **Melody says**

4 5 star stories and the last story was a flop. WTH? A story about a girl who decides to ignore magic. It was like when Susan Pevensie decided to grow up and forget Narnia.

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### **Lauren Dorman says**

I always enjoy McKinley's writing. It's obvious she draws so much inspiration from fairy tales and I love that about her as an author. I grew up reading them myself and whenever I read her books, I think about how one day, I'd like to be someone like her: a quite understated but also entirely relatable imagination stuck in a body that has to write to be free.

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### **Chelsea says**

I love Robin McKinley. I just really don't like them short stories, I can't help it! I get to the end of one and think one of three things. Either, "Hey, where's the end of my story?!" or "Hey, was there a story?" OR "Ewww. I need to take a mental shower." I just want to read a full story that has a beginning, middle, and end, and isn't all gross. I hardly think that's a lot to ask. However, all that being said, these short stories were more enjoyable to me than many I've read. (Note to self: Why do I keep reading short stories when I don't care for them?)

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### **Kalee says**

While I enjoyed the stories somewhat, and how different they were, overall I was more frustrated than happy with this book. The theme seemed to be "no closure." so be ready for that if you read it.

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### **Shelley Alongi says**

I really enjoyed reading these stories. They were easy to read and they had characters and a storyline.

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### **Rachel Brown says**

The title story is the only one set in the modern day, and it falls a bit flat. The other four, set in fantasy lands, are excellent. A light-handed, non-syrupy touch prevails in these moving stories of love lost and found. My favorites are "Buttercups," about a middle-aged farmer, the young woman he falls in love with, some unusual

magic, and a lot of realistic details of daily life on a farm, and "Healer," a moving tale about a mage and a young woman who cannot speak.

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### **Isabel says**

I really loved this book! Each story was intriguing and pulled me in. This book reminded me of why I love reading.

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