



## Scale-Bright

*Benjanun Sriduangkaew*

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Julienne's aunts are the archer who shot down the suns and the woman who lives on the moon. They teach her that there's more to the city of her birth than meets the eye – that beneath the modern chrome and glass of Hong Kong there are demons, gods, and the seethe of ancient feuds. As a mortal Julienne is to give them wide berth, for unlike her divine aunts she is painfully vulnerable, and choice prey for any demon.

Until one day, she comes across a wounded, bleeding woman no one else can see, and is drawn into an old, old story of love, snake women, and the deathless monk who hunts them.

## Scale-Bright Details

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Author : Benjanun Sriduangkaew

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## From Reader Review Scale-Bright for online ebook

### Peterb says

There are enough books written by non-sociopaths that I don't really feel the desire to give any time to books written by racist abusers, which is as fine a description of Benjanun Sriduangkaew as I've read.

So, no. Better luck next karmic cycle.

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### J. Moufawad-Paul says

I originally rated this novella with four stars but I've decided to add an extra stars because of political reasons. I'll explain...

I'm getting sick and tired of the people who have given \*Scale-Bright\* a poor reading without having read it because they happened to read something about the author's activities as a controversial reviewer of SFF. These are terrible ad hominem arguments about the book, and though I do think that some books should be rated based on their author's shitty political commitments [if you're openly a sexist, then we should take that into account when we rate your book], in this case it is in fact quite reactionary to downvote Sriduangkaew according to what you've happened to read by a bunch of (primarily) privileged, politically and economically, peoples' assessment of her internet activities. If all you've read is Laura Mixon's bullshit assessment of the Requires Hate affair, or you happen to like people like R. Scott Bakker that she reviewed with a disdain for his gender politics, then your assessment of her is piss-poor. It's even worse in the context of the Hugo awards being overrun by reactionaries.

I mean, Jesus h. christ, hasn't anyone ever heard of political polemics—is this now considered "abuse" by a bunch of people who have never been involved in any worthwhile political organizing context? Really, this is just liberal bullshit... and I mean "liberal" in the way that a proper radical left understanding of reality uses this word as a slur: bullshit individualism that rejects class struggle and an understanding of structural oppression in favour of some kind of "let's all get along" sentimentality that ends up reifying common sense norms. Maybe Sriduangkaew's past "trolling" comes out of the extreme limits of anti-oppression training, but that's just the reality of an identity politics left. (My experience comes out of struggle sessions, and that's far more intense than anti-o training, and it would be wrong of me to complain when someone identifies my shitty positions and demands rectification.) None of this is to say that she was always 100% correct in her wielding of the polemical hammer, but the fact that she intended to target hegemonic positions as a queer woman of colour meant that charges of "racism" are generally bullshit, particularly since they are levelled by liberals whose understanding of "racism" would also claim that there is such a thing as racism against white people, or sexism against men.

Instead of going on about this, I'll just provide a link to what I wrote elsewhere, back when this author was doxxed: <http://moufawad-paul.blogspot.ca/2014...>

In any case, back to the book in and of itself. I think this was an amazing example of prose for a first novella that demonstrated promise. I want to see a full novel, hopefully one in her sci-fi "hegemony" universe, in the near future. I worry that such a novel will manifest because of all of this backlash against her polemical persona.

Hence, the reason I moved my rating from four stars to one star is because I want that extra star to outweigh those reviewers who have chosen to give this book a bad rating \*without having read it\* just because they read something about the aforementioned controversy. Seriously, folks, don't rate books you haven't read because of some imagined beef with the author. Complain about the author elsewhere, start your own bloody blog, but reviews and ratings are meant to indicate YOU HAVE ACTUALLY READ THE BOOK.

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## Elizabeth says

Stunning.

I started writing this review a bunch of times and it kept turning into a big heap of superlatives and exaggerated descriptives because OH MY GOD THIS BOOK IS THAT AMAZING. It's quick little novella but has already put Sriduangkaew straight to the top of my 'wait impatiently for them to write the next thing' list and will be, without doubt, amongst my nominees for a Hugo Award.

The story shifts between mortal Hong Kong and the strange immortal realms of demons and gods and whilst our protagonist Julienne is human she is watched over by two divine aunties. This unfortunately makes her a rather attractive prospect for a demon in trouble and soon Julienne is immersed in a beautiful but terrifying world of celestial intrigue.

That description makes it sounds kind of silly but it really, really isn't. More than the plot what is so wondrous about the book is the writing and the characters. Carefully drawn, these gods and demons are at once achingly human and enticingly alien. I loved the relationships between the characters as well - it was so utterly refreshing to have a book full of women supporting and loving each other: the protective aunts, the sensual lover, the devoted couple, the loyal friend. And the writing, dear universe, the writing! It's so very good that at one point I had to stop reading to phone my mother to read her some of the sentences because I was going so loopy with joy over them. Yes, they are that good.

I find it hard to describe this book, even now with several day's distance. It is haunting and quiet but creeps in under you skin until you are filled with the glow of its snake-green radiance.

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## Alex MacFarlane says

Julienne is a regular young woman in Hong Kong, anxious and often lonely. After a snake demon, Olivia, drinks from her life force in a time of need, she is forced to face a little more head-on the reality that she also has Chang'e and Houyi for aunts. *Scale-Bright* follows on from the short stories "Woman of the Sun, Woman of the Moon", "Chang'e Dashes From the Moon" and "The Crows Her Dragon's Gate", all free to read online, which are not required pre-reading but recommended (for quality as well as clarity).

What I most loved about *Scale-Bright* was its depiction of anxiety, internalised fears and the slow process of stepping past those. Also: queer women! So very many. Julienne and Olivia and Chang'e and Houyi are wonderful, as is the writing, whether describing chandeliers of Buddha hands using sign-language (OMG) or the minor moments of realisation in a relationship.

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## Kym says

Okay so apparently I live in a bubble and was unaware of the raging shitstorm controversy surrounding the author (Google the name) but I read this book yesterday and I have to say the prose is really beautiful. Very, very beautiful.

The story is basically a modern/urban variation of some Chinese mythology so while I am not familiar with the original stories, it didn't detract from this being an enjoyable read. Did I mention the pretty word slinging? Yeah, gorgeously written.

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## Gerhard says

Lavie Tidhar, who won the World Fantasy Award in 2012 for his superlative novel *Osama*, has gone on record as saying that Benjanun Sriduangkaew may be “the most exciting new voice in speculative fiction today.”

Interestingly, Sriduangkaew thanks both Lavie Tidhar and Ann Leckie in her Acknowledgements – both these authors are singular genre voices themselves.

However, I do not think Sriduangkaew is as singular as either Tidhar or Leckie. Beyond the overwrought ornamentation of the writing itself, *Scale Bright* is a pretty standard urban fantasy, which reminded me a lot of S.P. Somtow (Sriduangkaew is also of Thai origin).

Sriduangkaew does not make nearly enough of her Hong Kong setting, so that it is actually difficult to distinguish between Hong Kong and Heaven, where part of the story is set. Due to the baroque writing style, the characters sound (unintentionally?) portentous, which made it difficult for me to get an emotional handle on the story.

Apart from the main novella itself, *Scale Bright* contains a handful of short stories featuring the same characters. At the end, I am unsure if the real Sriduangkaew is revealed here. That there is talent to burn is not in question; I think it is just a question of finding an authentic voice.

Having said that, one cannot avoid the recent controversy surrounding Sriduangkaew, who has been ‘outed’ as ‘Requires Hate’ and ‘Winterfox’, online aliases for vitriolic criticism (apparently including death threats.)

My feeling is that until Sriduangkaew herself engages on an open level with the writers she has targeted, that the work must, alas, speak for itself.

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## Allison says

Thrilled to have finally read something beyond the author's scattered online short fiction (everything I've read has been great). I have a weakness for retellings of myths and fairy tales (not to mention the fact that it's a lesbian retelling---even better), and this is among the best I've read. The characters were heartfelt, and the imagery was sumptuous, but I never felt overburdened by it. I didn't realize when I bought this that there were three more pieces of short fiction included, and those were also a delight.

## F says

dnf

The prose was horrifying

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## Jason Wintner says

Just 110 pages, but took me forever to finish this piece of trash. I'm beginning to think getting published is quite easy. One of the most pointless plots I have ever come across, combined with extremely dull writing. Non of the characters are relatable, there's a lot of good books around, don't waste your time with this one.

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## Nafiza says

Benjanun Sriduangkaew's novella *Scale-Bright* is set in Hong Kong and brings to life Asian mythology as is rarely seen in fiction I have read. I liked the novelty of the setting and I liked how Sriduangkaew presented the colourful characters that populated the novel. The tension is also kept high and the plot moves very swiftly, chasing one character and then moving to another.

I enjoyed *Scale-Bright* because it brings something different to the table: different sexualities, different ways of constructing gender and a different perspective from which to view the world. I did feel, however, that a little bit more setting more, a bit more of an introduction to the characters, world and mythology would have helped me root myself into the world. I also think that, perhaps, a better representation of males was needed in this book.

However, when all is said and done, I am excited to see a new author being given a chance to bring different, diverse stories to readers. Everyone has been talking about how we need diverse books and Benjanun Sriduangkaew delivers. Recommended.

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## Alis Franklin says

Lesbian urban fantasy/paranormal romance between a mortal girl and a vampire snake demon, set in Hong Kong. Bonus second romance featuring said mortal girl's divine aunts, who fall in love, are separated for centuries, and finally reunite in the modern world. In other words, *Scale-Bright* features some of my very most favouritest tropes of all time, and should be total catnip for me. Sadly, it's... not, for two reasons.

The first issue is the prose, which has a kind of florid, dreamlike quality I suspect is intended to evoke the feel of epic poetry. When it works, it works, particularly in "Woman of the Sun, Woman of the Moon" and "Chang'e Dashes from the Moon". When it doesn't, however, the result is a jangled mess of run-on sentences, tortured metaphors, and weird scene transitions that have characters jumping from one location to another with no mention of how they got there. Sadly, this "doesn't" is most evidenced in "*Scale-Bright*" itself, a.k.a.

the entire first half of the novella. The latter shorts show that Sriduangkaew *can* write, but there's an overly raw quality to "Scale-Bright" and "The Crows Her Dragons Gate" that makes me feel these should've been put through a few more edits before release.

My second problem with *Scale-Bright* is more nebulous. In essence, there seems to be a really nasty, misanthropic worldview on show in these stories that makes it very difficult to love the characters and feel for their narratives. No-one *likes* anything here! Everything--from the characters to their interactions to the city of Hong Kong itself--is framed in deeply negative terms. The result is everything feels very hollow and loveless; obviously not the greatest outcome for a romance story! A few more dashes of humanity and compassion would make *Scale-Bright* truly amazing.

**Obligatory disclaimer:** Yes, I'm aware of Sriduangkaew's contentious history and yes, I've written about it before, and yes, I have been on the receiving end of her online vitriol back in the dim-dark days of 2011. So yes, this was a curiosity read for me. I admit I liked it more than I thought I would, but there are still... issues here. Lots and lots of Issues.

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## Rob says

...I loved this novella, even if it left me with the feeling I missed a lot of what Sriduangkaew put into it. I don't consider that a problem besides the obvious blind spot in my knowledge of Chinese mythology. Books can be read again and *Scale-Bright* is one of those pieces that probably should be read several times to fully appreciate it. I'm not entirely sure that I would recommend this novella as an entry point but I will say that if you haven't already read some of her stories, you are missing out. Benjanun Sriduangkaew once again shows that she is a major talent in speculative fiction. I for one, can't wait to see what she comes up with next.

Full Random Comments review

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## Jason says

And my recent spate of five-star reviews continues today with this stunning novella from Bee Sriduangkaew.

I am trying to think of anyone writing SFF in English today who is a finer prose stylist.

\*time passes\*

\*more time passes\*

I give up. Mmmmmaybe Cat Valente or Sofia Samatar. Maybe. But at this point we're more or less in Cantorian set math territory. How can one infinity be larger than another?

Also, this is a really good story, about a woman learning how to let herself want what she wants (so I thought, anyway), and with lots of excellent gods and demons and marvels.

Buy it. Read it.

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## Witch of Angmar says

Sriduangkaew accomplishes more character development in five pages than most other authors (except Beagle) achieve in one-hundred pages. I cannot think of a way to articulate how beautifully abstract her descriptions are, except to compare them to the descriptions in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle. They have a different tone, of course, but they reach the same emotional depth. Also like *The Last Unicorn*, *Scale Bright* is a very short novel. Don't get me wrong, I LOVE long fantasy novels/series (like *Lord of the Rings* and the *Dragonsbane* series and Mary Stewart's *Arthurian Saga*), but I'm beginning now to appreciate more concise novels. Both *The Last Unicorn* and *Scale Bright* provide beautiful and vivid descriptions, but without the excessive detail found so often in other fantasy novels, like *Game of Thrones*. As I said: I still love long fantasy series, but I think these shorter fantasy novels provoke more work from the reader's imagination, which may, in part, explain how they reach such a deep emotional level for me. I highly recommend *Scale Bright*, for anyone who loves fantasy, and for anyone is looking for a different kind of fantasy than the mainstream.

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## Mieneke says

When I first came across Benjanun Sriduangkaew's writing last year I fell in love with her writing. Her style and voice are fantastic and I think she's one of the most exciting short fiction writers to have emerged in the field in the past few years. When the author asked on Twitter whether anyone wanted an ARC of her new novella *Scale-Bright* I couldn't raise my hand quick enough. A retelling of an old Chinese tale and a sequel to an earlier retelling of a Chinese legend with a gender twist, *Scale-Bright* sounded like an amazing story. And it was. I loved it whole-heartedly.

*Scale-Bright* is a wonderful story that is gorgeously told. Sriduangkaew writes a rich prose, providing beautiful visuals that are often surprisingly tangible; in one scene Houyi is cooking and I actually found myself hungry after reading it. Julianne's Hong Kong steams off the page, but so does Olivia's banbuduo, the place between, which is just as vivid and even more entrancing for its strangeness. The Gods' abode is otherworldly and celestial, yet it is not a kind or safe place. Throughout the narrative there is a sense that nothing – and no-one – is as it seems, something that is reinforced by the world building of banbuduo and heaven.

In this strange, new world she's discovered of ancient beings and underworldly denizens, her aunts form Julianne's anchor and the sole surety for safety. The interplay between Julianne and her aunts is fabulous. Julianne is understandably awed by these divine beings who have claimed kinship with her, yet they very much aim to be traditional aunties, which they don't always succeed at, being not very traditional at all. Julianne is seemingly taking a leaf out of the *Book of Unconventionality*, especially once she meets and falls in love with Olivia, who is far more than the beautiful woman she seems. Theirs is a relationship against all odds and I loved how Sriduangkaew shaped it. She also slips in some subtle hints to Julianne's mental health issues, to the anxiety and mood disorder she lives with and how these affect her reactions and decisions in the narrative. I appreciated these, especially as Julianne's bravest decisions aren't made to prove herself worthy or her aunts, or to prove her love for Olivia, but to prove her worth to herself.

I've actually read *Scale-Bright* twice. Once somewhat accidentally – I just went for a quick peek at the first few pages and then didn't put it down until I was finished – and once after reading all the connected short stories about Houyi, Chang'e, and Julianne. How did having read the previous stories affect my reading experience the second time? In terms of sheer enjoyment not much, though having some of the backstory did enrich some of the details Sriduangkaew drops into her narrative and made me recognise some of the visual clues I missed the first time. Having read the other stories – and indeed all of Sriduangkaew's short fiction I

could freely get my heads on – did elucidate some recurrent themes in her work that also appear in *Scale-Bright*, such as f/f relationships, finding one’s place in the world, and breaking away from societal expectations and gender roles. Overall I would say that *Scale-Bright* stands alone beautifully, but is enriched by knowledge of the other stories.

*Scale-Bright* is a fabulous story and it’s only confirmed Benjanun Sriduangkaew as an author to watch. I’d love to read more stories about Julianne, Olivia and the aunts, whether in short form or in long form. In fact, I’m generally excited to read more from Sriduangkaew in the future, be it this kind of fantastical retelling, stories set in her The Hegemony SF universe, or wherever she’ll explore next. If you’ve not read any of her work before then I highly recommend *Scale-Bright* as an entry point. But whatever you do, remember the name Benjanun Sriduangkaew; you’ll be sure to find it often on future award shortlists.

This book was provided for review by the author.

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