



## Song of the Sparrow

*Lisa Ann Sandell*

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## **Song of the Sparrow** Lisa Ann Sandell

The year is 490 AD. Fiery 16-year-old Elaine of Ascolat, the daughter of one of King Arthur's supporters, lives with her father on Arthur's base camp, the sole girl in a militaristic world of men.

Elaine's only girl companion is the mysterious Morgan, Arthur's older sister, but Elaine cannot tell Morgan her deepest secret: She is in love with Lancelot, Arthur's second-in-command. However, when yet another girl -- the lovely Gwynivere-- joins their world, Elaine is confronted with startling emotions of jealousy and rivalry. But can her love for Lancelot survive the birth of an empire?

## **Song of the Sparrow Details**

Date : Published May 1st 2007 by Scholastic Press

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Author : Lisa Ann Sandell

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## From Reader Review Song of the Sparrow for online ebook

### Erin says

*There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colours gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot.  
She knows not what the curse may be,  
And so she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
The Lady of Shalott.* Alfred, Lord Tennyson *The Lady of Shalott* (1832)

I didn't get hooked into Arthurian legends by reading, it was actually the 1995 feature length film *First Knight* and the performances of Sean Connery, Julia Ormond, and Richard Gere that intrigued me to the legend. As per the tragic figure of Elaine, Lady of Shalott. Well, that would be the fault of my first literary character, Anne Shirley (*Anne of Green Gables*) and her devotion to Tennyson. *Song of the Sparrow* is told in verse and puts Elaine on the centre stage. Although I am a bit lukewarm on reading almost 400 pages of verse, I did enjoy Lisa Ann Sandell's spin on giving us a full disclosure on Elaine. But there weren't a ton of surprises- Arthur is a good person, but a little blind when it comes to mean girl Guinevere and her affection for playboy Lancelot. Most of the knights make their appearances as well and they come with their own bag of issues. I would still recommend it, but probably wouldn't re-read it again.

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### Lena Morrison says

I do my reviews in the form of a letter, which is why they are written like this.

Dear Lisa Ann Sandell,

The actual rating for this book is a 3.5. I just preferred giving it a three. :) I more than just liked it, but I didn't "really" like it. It's in between.

When I first picked it up, I was twelve or eleven. I remember being bored to death in the beginning, but after a while I got really into it. I loved it at that time. I cried a lot in several parts.

I think the lower rating is due to a change in taste on my part. The book in itself was good, but I myself just didn't get into it. I don't know what it was. Some parts felt cheesy, and others felt incomplete. It takes a while to get used to the prose, but after that it's simple to get into.

I like Elaine. She is proud, but she is certainly very brave. I really liked how she got along with all the men at the camp. I hated Gwynivere at first, but later I liked her. I especially liked Tristan and Arthur of the men.

Lancelot was okay, but I felt he was too shallow.

Anyways, thank you for this book. It will always hold a special place in my heart as the first YA book I ever read.

Sincerely,  
Lena Marie

(P.S. I think it was the first...)

## Chachic says

Originally posted here.

*Song of the Sparrow* is based on Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, an Arthurian poem about Elaine of Ascolat. I've never read a novel in verse before and I thought it would be a good idea to start with this one because I like the premise. I don't read a lot of Arthurian tales either although I remember reading *Le Morte d'Arthur* for English back in high school and I love Elizabeth E. Wein's books. When I saw an inexpensive used copy from Julie's Sari-Sari Store, I bought it right away. Thanks to Celina for the heads up on where I could find a copy.

I was swept away by the beautiful writing in *Song of the Sparrow*. Maybe it's because of the verse format but it felt like I was reading a fairy tale instead of a historical fiction book. I was easily immersed in the story and I knew right from the start that Elaine and I would get along just fine. Elaine is a girl stuck in a world full of men and she can be described as "one of the boys". Her father brought her to Arthur's camp when her mother died and she's been there ever since. Her father and her two brothers fight alongside the knights of Arthur and she has great respect for all of them. As the only lady in their camp, Elaine's sewing and healing skills are in great demand. She doesn't mind because she's friends with most of the men in their camp and she enjoys the freedom that her lifestyle allows. What I loved about Elaine's character in this retelling is that she manages to show her strength without picking up a sword or fighting in a battle like other fantasy heroines (not that I don't love them). Elaine's infatuation with Lancelot is an integral part of the story because that's what she's famous for but I liked how the author provided a background for it - how Lancelot was always there whenever Elaine was lonely as a child and how he comes to the rescue the few times that Elaine needs help. It isn't a tragic kind of love, which was how it was portrayed by other writers.

I don't read much poetry so I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to relate to this one but surprise, surprise, the pages just flew by. To get a feel of the writing, check out the excerpt available in Lisa Ann Sandell's website. The story provided not just a clear picture of Elaine but of other well-known characters like Gwynivere, Lancelot, Tristan and Arthur. I loved seeing how Elaine interacted with all of them, even Gwynivere who is everything Elaine isn't - beautiful, ladylike, cold and cruel. I made an excellent decision when I chose *Song of the Sparrow* as my first novel in verse because now I'm curious about books written in a similar format. I wonder if other novels in verse are as lovely as this one. I highly recommend this to fans of Arthurian tales, retellings or novels in verse. Or maybe I should just say, read this if you want to fall in love with an exquisite retelling about Elaine of Ascolat, the Lady of Shalott.

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## Rabbit {Paint me like one of your 19th century gothic heroines!} says

I have a weakness for stories told in verse.

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## Reynje says

I read *Song of the Sparrow* last year, but it's only now that I'm posting my rating and review because, in truth, I was nervous.

I have good friends who all seemed to fall into passionate, swoony love with Lisa Ann Sandell's verse interpretation of the Lady of Shallott. And I.. did not. So I held off. Did I really want to be the lone lukewarm drop in the bucket of adoration? And maybe it was me. Maybe I was just a philistine with no literary taste. While reviewers and critics alike praise this book, I just didn't feel the magic.

After some thought, I suspect that verse novels are just not my particular "*thing*". Like when my friends are talking about how aesthetically pleasing Gerard Butler is and I'm just sitting there with my "*Um, what?*" face on. Or when people say that rocket is the best salad green, and I say "I hate rocket" and everyone goes quiet. (I have a complicated and ridiculous relationship with salad leaves, but that's a rant for another day). I feel a similar awkwardness in admitting that I don't enjoy reading verse novels.

As I read Song of the Sparrow, I remember having two very distinct, recurring thoughts.

- (1) "*I wish this story was written in prose, not poetry*" and
- (2) "*I just want to be finished with this*".

I'd flick forward to check how many pages I had left to read – not a good sign. I was loathe to give up and DNF it, because I thought that maybe, just maybe, I'd reach some incredible passage and see the light. Become a verse convert. Write a review testifying to the brilliance of this book.

But I can't.

Don't get me wrong – I think this is a good book. Very good, even. I enjoyed Sandell's particular take on the characters and the way she wove threads of the original legends, myths and historical texts into her own richly imagined story. This more "realistic" take on King Arthur, Lancelot et al is definitely to my taste. Likewise, I appreciate that Sandell wrote strong, interesting female characters who took initiative and demonstrated courage. I liked the way she developed the relationship between Elaine and Gwynivere, from initial coldness and apparent antagonism to mutual respect and friendship. On the other hand, I found the romance (view spoiler) very sweet, but not particularly compelling. (view spoiler)

It may just be the history geek in me, but I wanted more detail. More battle, more blood, more description, more dialogue. Basically the elements that would appear in a work of historical fiction/fantasy, but don't necessarily lend themselves to the flow and syntax of a story told in verse. To be honest, I found the rhythm of the poetry distracting rather than immersive.

I can see why people adore this book, and if you're a fan of verse novels, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this one.

As for me? Well I'm sorry, verse novels (and rocket. And Gerard Butler.) It's not you. It really *is* just me.

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## Jennifer Wardrip says

Reviewed by Holly for TeensReadToo.com

Sixteen-year-old Elaine of Ascolat is amazingly beautiful with her long red hair and her soft natural face. Living in an army camp full of all guys, Elaine figures the handsome Lancelot to be her true love. Until her troubles and daydreams get the best of her, when even prettier Gwynivere arrives at the camp and is immediately drawn to Lancelot - even though she is engaged to Arthur.

Gwynivere's mean remarks but beautiful outer self makes Elaine jealous enough to play a cruel prank on her, but when her friends and family leave her to go fight the Saxons, her heart tells her to pack a bag and go with them to heal the wounded. Shot by arrows and cut by a knife, Elaine gains both friendship and confidence in herself.

This exciting book by Lisa Ann Sandell makes you feel like you are back in olden times, right there fighting with Elaine. This is a VERY well-written book and I recommend it to all. A great read!

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## **Megan Hillard says**

7/21/2018

I swear this is the cutest most wholesome little book I have ever read in all my nineteen years!!

Like it's literally all about acceptance of yourself and loving those who love you (and not wasting time on mean hoes) and overcoming prejudices to make friendships and I just !!!!

I can't even deal right now!!

Ooookay. OKAY.

Sooooo my first novel (written at 13) was basically the love child of this book and the TV show *Merlin*, in YA-fantasy-novel format lol who let me be such a nerd?? I say that in the most affectionate way possible though because I love that novel, doozy as it was. Ahem. This just shows how much of an impact this little story has had on me.

Song of the Sparrow was literally my entire middle school life. Like, I'm pretty sure my heart beat to the cadence of this story for a good few months. It was one of my favorite books, and I'm proud to say it still is!

Like, the poetry was wonderful. The female! friendship! was just...boy. For a while there I was kind of stroking my chin, wondering if I would have to dismiss my childhood fave as being problematic, but then tears were in my eyes and my heart was happy at the beauty that is Elaine and Gwynivere. YES. Also, Tristan is <333. The loml. It also does not go by the established Arthurian myths and legends, especially not the conclusion. To which I offer...so?? (Please read the author's note/historical section for more information, Sandell says it more eloquently than I ever could and drops some #truths while she's at it.)

I...guess...the switch from Lancelot to Tristan was a little heavy handed and that's a flaw?? Other than that, I got nothing. I'm proud to say that I am an unabashed fan of this book for six years strong.

PS: why does the author look just like Anne Hathaway?? HOW does the author look just like Anne Hathaway? There's a conspiracy here, I can smell it.

SONG OF THE SPARROW was a song sung to the precise beating of my heart and I just...loved it so much.  
<3

Original review / 2012-ish tiny Megan awww  
4.5 stars.

REALLY GOOD.

If you are looking for a quick, sweet (and occasionally feeling) read, then this is perfect. It's written in verse, so it goes by soooooo quickly, and you can read it five or more times before getting tired of it.

\*Sigh\* Really great book ;)

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## **Adele says**

I am usually adverse to verse but having read two amazing verse novels this week, I am about to pull an about face. Song of the Sparrow was an absolute joy to read - lyrical, poetic, inspiring and wrenching. Drawing upon the stories of Arthur, Lancelot and Merlin, Sandell has strongly integrated the inspiration for Tennyson's poem, the Lady of Shalott, into the mix. Elaine (the "Lady" in question) has been raised in the war camps of 5th century Britain, by her widowed father amongst battle weary men. She's loved and respected by these men whilst operating within the confines of what was expected of woman of the day - washing and mending.

It reads like an absolute dream. The phrasing is so fluid, so rhythmic, that it rolls off of the page and seeps into your consciousness. Elaine is a strong character, aware of her obligations, supremely concerned for the welfare of those that she loves and in possession of great courage. She's a character that is immediately relatable, likeable and enviable. I personally loved the depiction of Gwynivere as a shrew preying on the attentions of men. She's the one character of Arthur lore that I have always found tedious and while she's initially portrayed as a 5th century 'mean girl', there is also surprising depths to be found in her. This can be said of all the characters, both those that are familiar and new, they are constructed to be both complex and clear in motivation. It's the epitome of exact phrasing and plotting within a story while taking you on a winding story.

Despite the fantastic economy of words in this novel, the characterisation and plotting, this novel presents many themes and adventure for the readers to delve into. Sandell explores grief, family unity, gender roles, the nature of love, friendship, infatuation, duty, courage and sacrifice all while grounding Elaine's story with her obvious love of verse and legend.

Divine.

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## **Caught Between Pages says**

What can I say? I love this book.

Are the characters' behaviors accurate depictions of how the historic/mythological figures they represent would behave? Probably not (especially the ladies)... but I love it. Is the conflict that drives the plot resolved very quickly and without much effort? Sure... but I love it. Is the setting beautiful and whimsical and just a little magical? You bet your ass it is, and I love it.

My love for this book is one part nostalgia for the story that got me into Arthurian legend, one part love for the tropes it uses, and two parts just plain fun. Objectively it's not a masterpiece of fiction

... but I love it. And so I stand by my 4/5 stars.

(Also I can't believe it's been THREE years since I've read it?? I could've sworn I'd read it at least once more

between June of 2015 and now...)

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## Holly says

Red-headed Elaine of Ascolat has been the sole girl at Arthur's war camp for as long as she can remember. Although she misses her mother and dislikes all the washing and mending Elaine wouldn't trade living with her father and brothers and being part of the military for a quieter life. There, as a healer, her job matters. She may not have fine clothes but she knows how to take care of herself and more importantly how to find and prescribe the herbs that can save the wounded. Her life would be complete if only Lancelot could see her as more than a tomboy. Just when she seems to be making headway another girl named Gwynivere arrives and Lancelot only has eyes for her. Fair skin, perfectly coiffed hair, soft hands and all seem no match for Elaine. That is until both girls are caught by the enemy. Here is Elaine's chance to shine, but will the sparrow find its song before being trapped for good?

This is the third novel in verse I've ever read and wow, is the writing gorgeous. The words just wash over you they are so fluid. It seems verse couldn't be more fitting for Lisa Ann Sandell's take on Arthurian legend and Alfred Tennyson's poem, "Lady of Shallott". This winsome passage was one of my favorites:

I wish I could go back to that time,  
When my mother would smile  
The gentle smile that told me,  
All is right and well.

Back to that time when I was  
Young  
And loved  
And safe.  
When we were all safe.

That things change,  
That people change  
And die,  
That we grow older,  
That life brings the unexpected,  
The unwanted,  
Oh,  
Some days it fills me with  
A measure of lightness, for  
I will be a woman soon.

But other days,  
The very thought  
of growing older,  
of not being that small girl  
who danced over river rocks,  
whose brothers held her hands,  
whose mother lived,  
the very thought of it  
crushes me,

till it is stopped,  
by the world  
outside  
my memories.

I've never been hugely interested in Arthurian legend beyond JW Waterhouse's beautiful Lady of Shallott paintings but I enjoyed Sandell's revisionist version. Much more than another King Arthur retelling THE SONG OF THE SPARROW is its own, unique story with a Elaine as a very strong, assertive protagonist rather than the flimsy damsel of legend. A good mix of the traditional and modern female roles, Elaine is not willing to sit around, making the mothers of feisty heroines everywhere proud. Likewise modern "mean girls" would accept beautiful Gwynivere in her mean-spirited, snotty treatment of Elaine. Even Tristan with his shameful past is very interestingly cast here as Elaine's witty friend. Such dimensional characters, lovely metaphors, and vivid imagery make THE SONG OF THE SPARROW a truly stunning read. Highly recommended to fans of well done retellings and verse novels alike.

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### **Annalisa says**

I've decided I just don't like modern books in verse. There is no cadence to them. Take for instance this stance:

The noise brings me back,  
the fearsome noise of swords  
striking swords,  
a metallic clanging that rings in  
my ears, echoing and echoing  
the fearsome  
din of men  
screaming and crying as they  
meet the sharp ends of blades.

Why is the fourth line broken after in? There is no rhythm in that. And why is the second to the last line not broken before as they? I'd personally separate echoing and echoing too. There are no examples in this stance of the words Sandell chose to set apart, but most of them lacked the power to require pause or emphasis. You pause at the end of a line, there should by rhythm, significance to those breaks. It gets frustrating to read a book with all these breaks that are insignificant and pointless. It detracts from some of the beautiful imagery that Sandell creates.

If you're going to take on something as iconic as The Lady of Shalott, and on top of that write it in verse, you better make sure your piece is worthy of comparison to the greats. Your characters can't be weak backdrops that requires legend to define as worthy of a story. As a fan of Arthurian literature, anything that attempts to redefine these historic stories must be strong and powerful and impressive. This was simple, too modern, and just okay.

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### **Cara says**

Love it. At first I was intimidated by it since it was in poem form, but I shouldn't have worried. It is a great addition to the great Athurian legends. Elaine is given a lot more strength, as are all the women in this book.

Elaine is practically the only woman in the camp of soldiers. You see the same faces in these book like Arthur (before he is the King), Lancelot, Tristan and others. Fast read and make sure to read the author's note at the end of the book. Again I can't say enough good things about it.

Note to self have to re-read to give a waaaayyyy better review.

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## Tina says

### Original post at One More Page

This year is the year of novels in verse for me, and I have been trying to keep one on my TBR in case of a need for a quick read. *Song of the Sparrow* by Lisa Ann Sandell is one of those books that hovered by my radar but I never really got because...well I'm not sure anymore. But anyway, when I saw a copy of this for swap in one of our Goodreads meet-ups, I got it immediately (with cackles of delight because I got it first -- then again I'm not sure if anyone else wanted this more than I did).

Anyway, I haven't read any book about Arthur or anything related to this legend, but I am a bit familiar because of all those Camelot-related cartoons and of course, Merlin. I wasn't familiar with any other characters there, though, so this book came as a surprise and a bit of a crash course with the legend. Elaine of Ascolat is one of the two girls in the military camp where Arthur and his men stay to fight for Britain. Elaine's only other companion is Arthur's sister, who she loves but can't talk to about her secret: that she is secretly in love with Lancelot, Arthur's right hand man. Then another girl joins them in the camp, Gwynivere, and Elaine suddenly felt some competition for Lancelot's affection.

I wasn't really afraid that I won't like this book, but I also wasn't expecting to really like it so much. Despite its historical/mythical nature, the passages in this book were very easy to read. It was easy to slip into Elaine's world and imagine how it is to be the only girl in a camp of men, and treat the guys as old friends and brothers who you know will also watch out for you. I could also easily feel her frustration of not having a girl friend in the camp and even more so Elaine's jealousy and anger when attention goes from her to Gwynivere. It may be the book's format that somehow made the book a little more romantic than I expected it to be -- poetry does have its merits in that department. Plus, I wasn't expecting the romantic twist in the story, and how it was resolved really made me smile. Then again, I don't know if the twist here is really a part of the Arthur legend, so maybe I'm the only one who's surprised.

A favorite passage:

*But I believe, I continue, I know what true love is -- or what it should be.*

*What should it be?* Tristan asks, his voice soft now.

It should begin with friendship, I think.

Suddenly I cannot look at him.

*It should begin with friendship and truly knowing  
who a person is, knowing his flaws and hopes  
and strengths and fears, knowing all of it.  
And admiring and caring for -- loving  
the person because of all those things.*

(p. 366)

*Song of the Sparrow* is a lovely book, and this has made me more curious about more Arthur stories. If you're looking for a quick and yes, a little bit romantic read, then pick up a copy of this book. :)

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### **Jacqueline (Fall In Love With The Sound of Words) says**

My Arthurian knowledge is very limited. I really only know what I have picked up in snippets from other books or television; which honestly wasn't very much. I had no idea that Elaine had even existed, and I only knew of Tristan from that movie with Heath Ledger; which I hadn't watched :D.

Okay so long story short, this was a fantastic first introduction for me. The pace was fast and easy, it flowed really well; and despite my worry that I wouldn't connect with the characters because of the format of the story, there was no problems there.

I love Elaine, she is such a wonderful woman! She has yet to come into her own; which is understandable considering she has been the only girl in a camp full of men. She feels almost childish in the beginning flitting around camp and pining over Lancelot. I was really worried for her considering I know where Lancelot's devotion ends up! But she tumbles through and comes out none the worse for wear. I loved how she stood up to Gwyneviere and ended up being the awesome badass woman she is! Major kudos to Elaine! The verse style of writing took a little while for me to get into as I am not really familiar with it. However, it really didn't take long to get into it. I don't think it took away from the story and the author was able to get across the emotions as well. Spectacular job! I highly recommend!

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### **Liz Janet says**

-Elaine of Ascolat, better known as The Lady of Shalott, is the main character in this new telling of Arthurian legend.

-It is told in prose.

-It is advertised as more of a romance than anything else, but it is much more than that, the story of a girl becoming a woman, a soldier, and a friend.

-I LOVE ARTHURIAN MYTH SO MUCH!!!

-Not very accurate on the Gwynivere canon.

-Or the original canon, but most works don't follow it, so there is that.

-Cool characters that have HONOURRRRRRRR!!!!!!!!

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### **Emily Cassady says**

This prose-style novel ends with the disclaimer that the author has completely used artistic license based on semi-fact. I love that the author spun a fanciful and romantic tale and ended it with responsible tone and further research notes.

Sandell, before beginning her tale, includes the poem by Tennyson entitled "The Lady of Shalott". This poem sets the tone for the main character who Sandell speculates, is actually the true Lady.

She then spins her tale of Arthur and the Round Table. Of Gwynivere, Lancelot, Tristan (of Tristan and Isolde fame), Merlin, and Elaine (The Lady of Shalott). In it she includes intrigues of all types. Her prose

style excellently frames up words that call for pause and digestion. It is masterful.

The story's main character is Elaine. Elaine lost her mother early on in the ongoing war over Briton. Since she was a little girl she has followed her father and brothers around from encampment to encampment, living among the men, serving as a healer, mender, etc... Elaine interacts with each of the afore mentioned characters and

Elaine is getting older. Lancelot notices Elaine and she quite easily falls for him, or at least acquires a crush. Lancelot leads her on a bit, gives her hope, but then has to ride out on a mission for Arthur, the new king. The mission is to bring back Arthur's new betrothed queen, Gwynivere, and along the way, as legend goes, Lancelot falls irrevocably in love with Gwynivere.

Once back at camp, Elaine feels betrayed at Lancelot's change of heart. To top it off Gwynivere has a far superior attitude and while Elaine and Gwyn should have shared a sister bond at this camp filled with all men, they now have a rivalry.

When Elaine slips off to follow Arthur's camp to war, Gwyn follows. And when Elaine falls into enemy clutches, it is up to Gwyn to save her. The two girls must hatch an elaborate plan to save the men that they love and, in turn, form an irrevocable bond.

With several sub-plots present and the whimsical language of chivalry, this novel is a great romantic read that will entertain students who like Arthurian lore.

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### **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

I have never had any interest in the Arthurian Legend, and have avoided the many books about it since reading *The Sword in the Stone* in grade 6 (and winning the school library's book jacket competition with a new cover for it), and struggling through the first fifty pages of *The Mists of Avalon*. There was even a course at uni that was solely about the legend of King Arthur - which I ran a mile to avoid. I can't really explain what I don't like about the myth, except to say that I don't get the attraction or why so many people feel the need to write their own versions of it. They also clutter up the fantasy shelves - since it is a myth, a legend, the books wind up there instead of the regular fiction section. I do love Monty Python's *The Holy Grail* though. Lovely a good piss-take.

This book is different, though. It is the story of Elaine of Ascolat, otherwise known as the Lady of Shallot, and it's a reinvigorated, emancipated story. Elaine has always got the short-shrift, suffering under a curse and early death, or dying of a broken heart. In *Song of the Sparrow*, Sandell tells the story of sixteen year old Elaine, raised since her mother was killed by Picts in the war camp of Arthur, living with her two brothers and her father.

The only female there, aside from Arthur's mysterious and wise sister Morgan who sometimes appears, she is friend, nurse and confidant to many of Arthur's men. Her hero is Lancelot, who has been her friend and playmate since she was 12, and whom she loves.

But when Arthur takes command of the Britons and Lancelot goes to fetch a nobleman who had at first refused Arthur's leadership, he brings back with him a beautiful young bride for Arthur, Gwynivere - and no one can miss the look of complete adoration on Lancelot's face when he gazes at her.

Gwynivere is cold and bitchy and spurns Elaine's offers of friendship while encouraging Lancelot's love. The enmity between them becomes hatred, and only the friendship of one of Arthur's knights, Tristan, can help soothe Elaine's pain. When the army marches to Mount Badon for an offensive attack on the invading Saxons, Elaine resolutely follows them, only to be caught by Saxons when she had nearly reached them - along with Gwynivere, who had followed her in turn.

Written in verse, I at first found it a bit weird - it didn't rhyme or even seem to have much of a rhythm, and it could easily have been laid out in regular prose format. However, after a few pages I slipped into the gentle cadences of Elaine's voice, found that there was a rhythm, a song to the words, that they glided through me gracefully and conveyed Elaine's story better than bald prose would have. Narrated in the present tense by Elaine, it carries a sense of immediacy, the language vivid and immersed in nature. The verse has deep roots with the earth, as Elaine is tied to it, as well as the honest emotions of herself and those around her.

Elaine is a strong, resourceful character with a decisive will. She is also very endearing and sympathetic and a great Young Adult heroine. No damsel in distress, here. Some fans of the Legend may feel it sacrilegious and too modern a version in its perspective and plotting, but since other stories of Elaine are also products of their times - and written by men - it's only fair. I guess this is why, to answer my own question, so many people feel a need to write their own versions of the legend. Plus, this is a really lovely story, and I can see it making a great film. I may have fallen in love with Tristan a bit.

Has it made me want to read more books about King Arthur and his knights? Not really. It has made me more curious about a period of British and European - and Roman - history that I'm hazy on. I studied European history from 1100 onwards, and only dealt with Roman history while studying Ancient Civilisations, so it's a bit of a blank spot for me. I wouldn't mind reading a really good history book on ancient Briton, if I could find one.

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## Angie says

Originally reviewed [here](#).

So this is a book I've spent a lot of time talking about. Chances are, if you've hung around these parts, you've heard me push it. But I actually read it for the first time way back in the olden days before the blog was, well, what it is now. I read it shortly after it was first published, back in 2007, when I was writing monthly posts, mere collections of mini-reviews. So SONG OF THE SPARROW got shortchanged. The fun thing is lots of friends have read (and reviewed) it since, and so I was able to trip through their lovely thoughts and remember my own. When I heard about a retelling of Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott," I was so in. I mean, I'm nothing if not up for a good Camelot tale. I could bore you to tears with my obsession with the entire Arthurian legend, but who needs that on a Friday afternoon? The thing is, when I heard this retelling was, like Tennyson's version, told entirely in verse, I was no longer so sure. Truthfully, I tend to like my modern poetry short and to the point. So I did what I often do. I went to the bookstore and read the first page. Then I read the second page. And on through the tenth, at which point I accepted the delicious inevitable and bought the book.

Elaine of Ascolat is sixteen years old and alone. The lone woman among an endless encampment of men, she has grown up wild and independent and determined to keep her father and brothers and friends alive. Though she is not allowed to fight alongside them, she works tirelessly in any way she can to keep their spirits alive, to mend both their limbs and their souls between battle forays against the ever-encroaching Saxons. After her mother died, her father brought his two sons and one small daughter to live with the soldiers. And so Elaine's oldest friends are Arthur, Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan. But when Ambrosius Aurelius, dux bellorum, is killed, Elaine must watch the laughing eyes of her friends turn grim with strain and responsibility. She must watch as they rally around Arthur--their new leader. As they reform in their new roles and battle leaders and men. And she must watch as a someone new enters their lives and disrupts their old balance perhaps forever. Gwynivere. Haughty and proud, she ensnares Elaine's friends with seemingly no effort at all. But, though her boys seem entranced, Elaine can see clearly just how much craft Gwynivere puts into the web she casts. And when that web extends to Lancelot, the one she loves most, wild, independent, determined Elaine decides it

is time to fight at last.

This book. This book set a flock of butterflies free in my stomach on the first page. The writing is that heady blend of urgency, vision, and nostalgia. I loved Sandell's revisionist version of Elaine of Ascolat. I *knew* there was more to her than her magic web and her love for Lancelot. I just *knew* there was. Sometimes you meet a character, sometimes over and over through the years, and you know her. In bits and pieces, through various art forms and articulations, I have always felt a kinship with the lily maid. But it took until Lisa Ann Sandell decided to paint her version of her, for me to realize why. All that history you just know is there, the spell, the mirror, knotted web of threads, the loyalty to Lancelot, it all comes together in SONG OF THE SPARROW. Any lover of all things Arthurian will tell you, it can be a life of suffering. A rich life, but a rocky one. This retelling soothes the soul. And the beautiful thing is that, by all accounts, it seems to work for newbies (even those utterly uninterested in the myth) as well as us dedicated fans. And it's because the writing and characterization are strong and sure. I'm so glad this Elaine chose to fight instead of die. I loved beautiful Gwynivere, and the choice she makes. The women in this novel are ace. They inhabit the tale, fleshing it out with life and pain and wanting, and together they are my favorite part about this version. But right up there with the ladies is the way Sandell wove in Tristan and his horrible past. In a genius move, we get a glimpse of Tristan (of Tristan and Isolde fame), and I kind of am of the opinion it should always be this way. Forgive the long passage, but it is the moment Elaine first comes to the camp, and it is a favorite.

It was nighttime when we reached the camp.  
When my mind began making sense  
of what it saw and heard again.  
In the torchlight I could see Lavain's face  
was smeared with dirt,  
streaked with ash.  
His eyes were still wide with shock,  
so white  
so white  
against his dirty ash face.  
He looked like a scared, wild animal.  
I must have looked the same.  
Frightened animals.  
Arthur, younger then,  
stepped forward,  
caught my father in his  
arms in an embrace.  
Then Tirry.  
He pressed little Lavain's shoulder,  
then put his hands on my hair,  
petting, stroking.  
And I felt safe,  
a tiny bit,  
for the first time again.  
*Poor children*, he murmured.  
*You are welcome here,*  
*in this camp,*  
*into this brotherhood.*  
*Lavain, someday, no doubt,*  
*you will be a fierce fighter.*  
*Aye, I can see it in your eyes.*  
*But for now, you must take care*  
*of your little sister.*

Lavain turned away sullenly, but I alone saw him blink  
back tears.

Arthur looked to me,  
*What a brave girl you are,  
indeed, I've never met a girl  
so courageous.*

*There are not any others  
here to keep you company,  
but you have a whole army  
of brothers now.*

He gave me a sad smile and  
stepped back.

Then raven-haired Lancelot came to us,  
kneeling to look in my eyes.

And I felt I was standing in  
the sunlight, as though  
his bright gaze alone could warm  
my frozen insides.

He had blankets for Lavain and me.

And once more I felt protected.

Finally, a young boy who could not  
have been more than a few years  
older than Lavain

presented me with a doll  
unevenly sewn of corn husks and rags.

He turned to Lavain and placed  
a wooden sword in his hand.

He said his name was Tristan.

His golden cat eyes shone in the dark,  
his mouth downturned, his brow  
creased as though--  
as though he knew.

He said his name was Tristan . . . This one joins Beauty, Daughter of the Forest, The Outlaws of Sherwood, and Valiant on my most beloved retellings shelf. I love gifting it. I love re-reading it. And I will be doing both for the foreseeable future.

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## **Valerie says**

I loved this book. I was a bit worried about the poem structure and I was also worried because it was about Lady Elaine. But I really could admire Elaine and her courage. And I could follow the book just fine. I really liked that the men were very chivalric and honorable. The few women that were in the story were not pathetic and swooning all the time. They actually played a big part in Arthur's success. Elaine helped in a realistic way during that period in time. After I finished reading it I was smiling from cheek to cheek. Although I think that this book is more for girls, which is fine with me.

Hope to read it again.

## **Nomes says**

4.5 and a fave read of the year :)

A re-telling of the Lady of Shallott in verse (I am the fan. of the verse.)

Featuring Camelot, Lancelot, Arthur and Tristan (from Tristan and Isolde)  
sounds kinda cool, yeah?

Started slow for me, but then suddenly I couldn't put it down. And I stayed up sneakily until 2am just having the best time reading it.

Loved it, a re-read for sure.

Lyrical and atmospheric.

Even felt a little teary towards the end... which was weird, to suddenly feel that prickle of tears but also kind of awesome.

And, gosh, how much did I CRUSH on Tristan?

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