



Last Dragon

J.M. McDermott

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The debut of a brilliant new voice that will change the fantasy genre forever.

An intricate web of stories weave together to tell a tale of revenge, justice, ambition, and power. Zhan has been sent to find her grandfather, a man accused of killing not only Zhan's family, but every man, woman, and child in their village. What she finds is a shell of a man, and a web of deceit that will test the very foundations of a world she thought she understood.

A tale of revenge that grows into something more, *Last Dragon* is a literary fantasy novel in the tradition of Gene Wolf and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. J.M. McDermott brings the fantasy genre to new literary heights with a remarkable first novel that will leave critics and readers alike in stunned awe.

Last Dragon Details

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Author : J.M. McDermott

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From Reader Review Last Dragon for online ebook

Daniel Swensen says

Reading Last Dragon reminded me of watching Andrei Tarkovsky's "Stalker." It's languid, dreamlike, and occasionally confusing, but the end result is haunting and compelling. The story of a dying empress told in epistolary, Last Dragon has the scope of an epic story without any of the traditional epic fantasy trappings. There are no huge battles, no action sequences, just hard choice and the bleak consequences they bring.

And "bleak" really is the word. I don't mean this as a criticism, but Last Dragon is not a happy book. Death and loss are major themes. McDermott's world is hard and unforgiving, and puts most "gritty" authors to shame with the merciless details of his setting.

I did find the unconventional narrative a bit difficult to follow at times, and a few points were so cleverly obfuscated that I found it bordering on the twee. I think that's just a function of the unreliable narrator at work, though, and it's forgivable. Overall, it's a beautifully written book. Based on Last Dragon, I'd read another McDermott story, perhaps several.

Alex says

The Sci-fi Fantasy field is so overburdened with epic tomes and traditional genre fiction that – as good as much of it is – whilst genre fanatics devour the next instalment from their favourite commercial author, the literary, clever, or the beautiful tend to get thrown onto the curiosity pile and allowed to sink without a trace. I've read reviews of McDermott's "Last Dragon" that, whilst they praise it as a good novel, hardly recommend it unless you enjoy "literary fantasy". Supposedly this is a book that's only worth reading if you're, y'know, into Gene Wolfe and other overcomplicated, convoluted and obfuscatory bullshit. In other words, sure they can write and they have good ideas, but "where the fuck is the story??"

This may be why, although I have a ridiculous and unexplainable passion for heroic fantasy and those epic tomes myself, I struggle to truly identify with fantasy and sci-fi geeks. If a book such as McDermott's Last Dragon doesn't scream at you "I AM A GODDAMN FUCKING MASTERPIECE" then you and I really don't understand literature in the same way.

Last Dragon is really too good a novel to remain a curiosity forever and it's a great novel for so many reasons. Employing a mixture of stream of consciousness, fractured narrative and unreliable narrator techniques, and weaving it all together in a beautiful, sensitive feminist story, McDermott speaks the ghosts of Virginia Woolf as well as Gene Wolfe, and in doing so carves out his own niche that could happily stand-up alongside such great writers. Zhan's story begins at the end, revealing everything that happens on the first page, but filling in the details that one needs to know to understand Zhan's story as her memories unfold piecemeal, in a wistful, dreamlike and non-linear fashion, sucking you into her web of thoughts and memories that are often as mysterious as they are engaging. As a reader you won't always understand Zhan's recollections, they're not completely coherent and they're not guaranteed to be true, and yet as we turn the final page we have at least an understanding, a grasp of what has happened to Zhan and we too feel as if we're connected to her in her web. Fascinatingly to me – as a contrast to Gene Wolfe's writings – McDermott uses his literary confusion techniques to pull the reader into the mind of his central character whereas Wolfe generally pushes you into a relationship of mistrust and questioning. I don't know if Zhan really is an Empress, has a dead child, a husband or a lover. I don't know if the characters in her story existed or if the entire narrative is a fabrication designed to allay the guilt she has for the crimes she has committed. I don't

even know who the hell she's really writing or speaking to. But I do know that I care for her story and the emotions and events that underly them. This, then, is less of a puzzle narrative than you'd find in a typical Wolfe novel. There are frequent poetic allusions and metaphors that recur - the ants particularly will continue to haunt me for some time, especially with relation to Korinyes – but they're not there to be tricky and clever, they're there to provide a continuity of ideas throughout the book as elsewhere the narrative slips and slides in a myriad of different directions.

McDermott's literary technique is a delight. At the level of pure prose he's one of the finest stylists I've read in some time. Every page is full of beautiful, fragmented ideas, snatches of imagery or simple rhythmic poetry. I re-read many pages several times as I went through just to enjoy the way in which McDermott brought his world to life through his words. His narrative style is yet even more intriguing. He makes writing a fractured narrative look simple, but I felt constantly aware of the skill in which he'd employed it, leading me down certain paths and pulling me away at appropriate moments to reflect on other parts of the story with thematic continuity. Introducing characters and ideas at seemingly jarring times that gave their ultimate stories more poignancy when we later learn either their fate or their backstory. There's never a moment in this book where I didn't feel that McDermott was in control of the story, where it was going, where it had been and most importantly the particular effect he wanted it to have on me, the reader at a particular time.

This review may have started with vicious hyperbole but I'm ending it with a plea to give it a chance. This is a very great book (even though it's *gasp* a fantasy book). It's not an easy book, it's not a book designed to be read purely for the story and you won't likely appreciate a full A-B character progression when reading it. There are no epic battles

“The battle was epic, of course. I shall avoid it entirely. I do not care for epic battles, Adel. I have seen far too many of them to think anything of them. They are battles like any other. (p.387)

But it's a book to be cherished and savoured. It's a book to be read when you've tired of epic battles, traditional stereotypes or plays on traditional stereotypes and fantasy themes. There's so much more here, from unusual character types to unusual emotions and ideas. It's a book with so much to talk about, from the struggle of the individual female voice and her inability to tell her stories in the way that she wants to, to the fragility of humanity and its political systems, to the way that language works, confuses or even changes our perception of reality, to discourses on our relationships with nature. This book doesn't come at you like a freight train with these ideas, you will need to find them and discover, but they're so well worth discovering and they are expressed so well.

Enough of the hyperbole. This book is magnificent, that's all you need to know. I can't wait to read the rest of McDermott's novels and I hope that the rest of the world discover him soon.

Clarice says

This book had a lot of story telling elements that I enjoy in fiction. The non-linear style, jumping through the story and back again, telling small details of the story and then expanding on it later. It's very much a print version of some hypertext stories I've read. I definitely have a bit of the "damn it! someone did it before me!" reaction. On the other hand, Hal Duncan did it before this person, but that's ok.

This book only gets 3 stars as there were a lot of loose threads left open at the end, and this sort of thing always leaves me rather annoyed and grumpy. Otherwise, it was an interesting story to puzzle at here and there, it just needed to go a bit further.

Simon says

I don't know if reading this book in the depths of winter was a good idea or not but it certainly brought it home to me some of what the characters must have been feeling wandering the snowy wastes and mountains in the second half of the story.

I say second "half" as if there is any kind of structure, beginning, middle and end. Which belies the fact that this is probably the most fragmented story structure I have ever read although, I have to say, it is by design. The narrative consists of fragments of memory recalled by a dying queen and aimed at conveying her story to her estranged daughter (whom we never encounter in the story). These fragments are any thing from a couple of lines to a couple of pages long and one fragment never carries on directly from its predecessor. Gradually, as the narrative proceeds, a complete story is pieced together.

The narrative style is both the book's greatest strength and its greatest weakness depending on your point of view. For a lot of people, this will simply serve as a barrier to engaging with the story and characters; it simply cannot be read and enjoyed in a conventional way. But for others, like myself who crave something new and different from fantasy, will find it most refreshing.

It's unique narrative style is not the only thing that sets it apart from other fantasy though, it also has an elegant and thoughtful prose. The characters are well drawn, gritty and real, their emotions and feelings well conveyed. The hardship and physical suffering the characters endure on their quest is also convincingly portrayed.

I didn't know whether to give this four or five stars. I felt that I wanted to know a little bit more about why some of the characters did what they did and about what happened after this story concluded but these are both understandable omissions because this is most firmly the experience and memories of one character, we only see and understand the actions of others through her eyes and she is only interested in conveying a particular story, a particular chapter of her life. Therefore I can't really fault this book at all. Five stars it is.

Scott says

I received an "advanced reader copy" of this through LibraryThing.Com. It was my first ARC. For a synopsis, I am borrowing parts, with my alterations, of a review by Michael Levy for Strange Horizons.

Zhan, an aging woman, perhaps an empress, is recalling her life in what we eventually realize are a series of short letters to a long-absent lover named Esumi. As a young woman, a member of a primitive northern tribe, Zhan was quite literally in the midst of taking her final vows as a warrior when she was called back home by a terrible tragedy. Her grandfather, a wild, perhaps mad, wanderer who had spent years away from their ancestral village, had returned home and slaughtered Zhan's entire extended family before escaping south through the snow. Zhan and her shaman uncle, Seth, have been charged with tracking him down, executing him, and returning him (in zombie/golem form) to the village to bear witness to his crime. Along the way they accumulate companions – a renegade noblewoman, an aging mercenary, a simpleton, a beautiful gypsy who turns out to be something other than entirely human. Unwittingly during their stay in a country called Proliux, they have alerted the vicious and greedy rulers to the existence of a perhaps less powerful civilization to their north and Zhan and her friends soon

find themselves racing ahead of an army, hoping to reach home in time to spread a warning of impending invasion.

Now this, as Levy says, is the straightforward edition of the plot line. But the book does not follow this chronologically at all. It jumps all over the place. Some found it tough to get a hold of at first. Knowing this going in, I found it less annoying and not as difficult. But it's strange to learn that someone has died by someone else's hand, yet in the next section of the book that person is still alive.

This way of telling a story can be seen as literary genius, or just plain stupidity. It's somewhere in between. I wouldn't call it genius, but it leans much heavier on that side. The biggest reason for this is the only part where it seems like a bad idea is the breaks in momentum. This style could have still be used very liberally, and to great effect, with even less jumping around and letting sections play out more then they did.

Many have called this book a "fantasy novel for adults", which kind of disses just about 90% of the fantasy writers out there, including some that have very well respected reputations. However, I see where those kind of comments are going. There is no build up of heroes or heroines. There is no precise descriptions of the elegance around. There are no little bits of whimsy or humor. It is stark in description, and when it is there, it is a gritty, dirty world, and beyond which some already consider as such in normal fantasy tropes. There is not a lot of explanation. It is up to the reader to put light to facts and surroundings or references to the past or other objects/subjects. The book makes the reader work. It's literature that just happens to be set in a fantasy type setting, meaning not of our history, and with a little bit of magic, and that is dark as well and not used to get out of trouble.

So there are things that are both good and bad about the novel, but it is clear that Mr. McDermott is a talented writer and will be making a good first impression across the board, even through the shortcomings of the book.

Judah says

While the basis of this book is quite familiar territory for anyone whose ever read fantasy (country bumpkin goes on a quest and discovers larger destiny in the world) the way it's handled is refreshingly new.

Some may find themselves turned off by the way the pages/chapters jump time and space with no warning, but if you give in to the flow of it, it's easy to follow after a short while.

Some parts did lack clarity, I have to say. Whether this was intentional, due to the style of the book, or due to this being a new author is hard to determine. Again though, it lends itself to the dream-like quality.

My one main complaint is the actual printing style. I.E. having *numerous* pages that only have one sentence/paragraph on them. It strikes me as physically wasteful.

Jason says

Much like the story itself, it's a little hard to find the beginning of a review on this book. There were a lot of things I liked very much about this novel, the author's first, which succeeds for the most part in implementing some very difficult storytelling techniques. Overall, though, I felt it reads more like the work

of a very talented amateur than a professional author.

The novel is told non-chronologically, in the form of letters written by the dying narrator, Zhan, to her once-lover Esumi. As such, the ordering of scenes and events is more intuitive than logical; it appears the narrator is jumping from one memory to another as her mind associates images, places, and words. The effect is reminiscent of such works as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* or Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Short Sun*. In fact, I would be unsurprised if the author has read his fair share of Gene Wolfe: the narrative experimentation and the need for the reader to actively assemble the story in his or her own mind remind me of some of Wolfe's best works. It's a difficult trick to pull off, but McDermott succeeds... mostly. Before too long into the novel, the reader is given enough information to piece together a rough chronology; at least, the author is fairly clear about letting you know whether or not a given scene takes place before, during, or after the "current" point in the narrative. Unfortunately, this effect seems to taper off towards the end, as the story becomes much more linear in the last quarter or so of the novel.

The plot itself is interesting, though not exceptional. It combines elements of a coming-of-age tale, revenge, justice, travelogue, and politics in some rather unique ways. I'd have much preferred, however, if the author had focused more on the interplay between these themes than on the fractured narrative structure, which, although interesting, can't entirely sustain the novel. I also found the ending somewhat dissatisfying: given that the reader in large part knows the outcome from the beginning, it would have been nice if the climactic moments had been presented in some new or unexpected way. Instead, the story builds to a climax that never comes, instead quickly glossing over those final events and leaving me, at least, feeling slightly cheated out of a proper ending.

The characters are effective for the most part, though some seem to be largely unnecessary. I enjoyed the fact that we are given glimpses of several of the characters long before we actually "meet" them in the story. It gives a haunting effect, as of faces half-glimpsed through fog. On the one hand, the characters seem one-dimensional at times; on the other hand, their motivations are clear and understandable. The only exception to this is the character Adel, who the narrator never fully understood. I don't think enough information is given to truly grasp this character, and she's left as an unsatisfying question mark. The work would have been much stronger if the author had paid more attention to Adel, who is arguably the main character of the novel. (As an aside, she may also be the title character, if I'm understanding a very oblique reference mentioned in one scene. Then again, I may simply be reading too much into it. Otherwise, the title doesn't seem to relate much to the content of the story at all.) In the end, it seems as if the author can't decide whether he's more interested in Zhan or Adel, and as a result neither gets the full treatment she deserves.

The prose is, for the most part, well crafted. The narrator writes in a clipped, matter-of-fact style, with short declarative sentences being the norm. This does begin to sound repetitive after a while, but the author clearly made some attempt to vary the style while keeping the narrative voice. After a while, I noticed the clipped writing less and less, though the narrative voice was still quite clear. The descriptions are quite good when they appear, often evoking vivid, detailed imagery. I would have preferred more detail be given about the settings, especially the city of Proliux. It's supposed to be completely alien to Zhan, unlike anything she's ever experienced before, but the lack of detailed description renders it, in my mind at least, as "generic big foreign city." A few telltale glimpses of the architecture or the customs would have gone a long way toward building a strong setting, especially given the author's skill with descriptive prose.

My biggest critique of the novel, however, lies in the level of individual words, especially names. Names, perhaps more than anything else, are the key to establishing a consistent sense of place and culture. This is especially true in fantasy literature (it is, perhaps, unfair to invoke Tolkien here, so I'll let that pass), though one doesn't have to leave the real world to find this phenomenon. Consider these: John, Brian, Lancaster; Akiko, Yoshinori, Saijo; Mbwana, Jumaane, Shangani. Each is consistent in sounds and structure, and evokes a very specific kind of image in the mind. By contrast, the names in *Last Dragon* don't seem to adhere to any specific pattern. For example, the following are all supposed to be from the same culture: Zhan, Seth,

Tsui, Alameda, Bear, Ilhota (not to mention that Zhan uses both the words "skald" and "sensei" to describe roles within her land). Reading the acknowledgements gives a clue as to why the names are so disjointed, but even so, I found it to deeply break the sense of immersion in the novel (though I won't deny allegations that I'm overly language-focused in general).

Overall, I'd say this is a good book, and well worth reading if you're a fantasy fan. The reason I criticize it so much (perhaps too much) is because I feel that it could have been a top bestseller with a little more polish. Even so, McDermott is a highly promising young voice in the fantasy genre, if this debut novel is any indication. I look forward to following what I hope will be a long and successful career for him.

Kristen says

3 1/2 stars

J.M. McDermott's debut Last Dragon is one of the books published under the new Wizards of the Coast Discoveries imprint. Discoveries includes novels by new authors in all types of speculative fiction instead of just epic fantasy with settings outside of the Forgotten Realms universe. The goal is to publish more mature fiction that appeals to adult readers instead of the simplistic but fun stories that often end up getting adolescents hooked on reading fantasy. Far more original and artistic than the typical Wizards of the Coast book, Last Dragon succeeds at meeting this standard, though it is not flawless.

Complete Review:

<http://fantasycafe.blogspot.com/2008/...>

Tim says

I was talking to some people I work with and I asked them if they read. I received a few hearty responses and I asked them what they liked to read. I know these particular two people do read quite a lot and when they asked me what I like to read, I replied "I read a lot of fantasy....." I would have finished the sentence but I had a strange feeling someone behind me had died. I think the word "Fantasy" is a conversation stopper. When you are talking to people who read, but do not read fantasy, it seems every time the "F" word is brought up, people do not know how to react. They put on their best perplexed face and ask "What, like Lord of the Rings?" and you say "Yeah, something like that.". The popular misconception with Fantasy is that it cannot move past it's fairy tale origins and move into the literary realm, but I believe this is an absurd assumption. I think to most readers the Fantasy genre is something that is reserved for their childhood and does not encompass the breadth and width of the adult experience. But when I read Last Dragon by J.M. McDermott I realized why I have dedicated so much time to this genre and why I love it so much.

This novel mesmerized me, the prose is gorgeous and Mr McDermott has instilled his words with such longing and sadness and I do not think I have reacted this way to a novel for a long time. His words can bring images to mind so vividly that the world of Last Dragon feels truly realized. The way he describes a scene often instilled a wonder in me and allowed me to fully suspend disbelief which is so important in the genre of Fantasy.

*"Seth held the match in the air, casually. Korinyes leaned forward and blew on the match. Little tongues of fire flew out from her breath.
The fire fell like rain on the cobblestone. She opened her eyes in wonder.*

You are pretty girl, he said, pretty fire girl.

Seth placed the match into his mouth, and his mouth lit up with fire. He puffed burning rings that drifted away like ghosts.”

The story revolves around Zhan’s letters to her love Esumi. They are memories of her quest to avenge her family’s death at the hands of her grandfather, and her grandfather’s betrayal of her homeland to a ruthless enemy. The story is non - linear and does jump back and forwards in time, but there is always a thread that connects each letter/memory to each other. A lot of reviewers said that this format was too jarring and did not flow well, but i thought the exact opposite. I really enjoyed the way each letter revealed a new connection to something I had read previously, or shed a new perspective on a previous scene. This ultimately is a quest narrative but it is so differently done that you never feel like “Oh, I have seen this before.”, each character involved with Zhan and Seths quest of retribution is there for their own reasons.

The world of Last Dragon is fully realized with different religions, empires and cultural diversities. There is so much hinted at and not explored and while some might think that is a bad thing, I think that what we saw of this world fit perfectly into the story that was told. The city of Proliux with it’s Asiatic inhabitants and it’s feel of a crumbling giant. The empire of Alemdea, harsh tundra and stealer of life. There really is a lot to savor in the world of Last dragon, particularly the scene in which they travel to the dragons cave, this was an absolute highlight in the novel.

At the end of the day all this would be for naught if there were no characters we could grow to love and ultimately sympathize with. Whilst the whole novel is told from Zhan’s viewpoint we do get some of the other characters stories through what they have related back to Zhan. I thought this was a great way of adding depth to the supporting cast and really making them feel alive. The characters endure betrayal, love, friendship and hardship, all the makings for a classic fantasy tale. Another character which we never see or hear from is Esumi, but without this character the story would not be possible. The aching heartbreak that Zhan infuses her letters to Esumi with resonates deeply.

“We are divided at the heart. When we hold each other, we are slowly healed. When we are apart we bleed to death.

I cough blood, and I cough blood, and I cough blood.

Do you remember these lips? They are red all the time, like fresh spring berries because they are always covered in the blood of longing.”

This is one of the best fantasy novels I have ever had the pleasure of reading. If I could give more than 5 stars I definitely would. Would I recommend it to someone who has not delved into the genre? Probably not. This is something for the lovers of Fantasy to enjoy, something new and fresh. If more Fantasy writers tried new directions instead of falling back on the old tropes, maybe there would be more widespread acceptance and reading of one of my favourite genres.

Jon says

This book was thrust upon me by a man in a coffee shop outside of the Austin Convention Center who turned out to be the author.

Maarja says

This is a very interesting and quite unique book of literary fantasy that could also be categorised as epic fantasy. There is a lot of world-building (though not told in big chunks, but rather between the lines), and there are, *inter alia*, shamans, mercenaries, paladins, princes and even a dragon.

While the book's nonlinear storytelling made the story, at times, difficult to follow, I found it very realistic. Considering the storyteller is a very old person recounting the memories of her youth, it's only natural that one thought leads to another at a different point in time. To the contrary, in such context telling the story in exactly the right chronological order would be very hard to believe. Another aspect of the writing I liked was that when Zhan first reaches an unfamiliar nation, she obviously doesn't know the language, so the first conversations are told in short broken sentences, and it is shown how also later, gaps in the vocabulary may appear at any moment. This adds another layer of realism.

But the book is also fascinating outside of the technical aspects. The author has clearly worked hard on world-building - it's large, but cohesive. I also found it believable how Zhan with her white skin is often held as someone strange or even sick among this "cinnamon-skinned" people, but also how she openly wonders about the strangeness of the black-skinned people - never in a bad way, more innocent and child-like (I do realise it would never be okay in the world we live in, but I imagine it's very realistic for how someone first encountering people of other ethnicities they've never even heard of would think). There's some magic in this world, but it hasn't really been explained, rather the reader has to figure most of the things out themselves. But I have rarely seen shamanism in fantasy literature, so that in itself was fascinating, and I also found the creating of a golem (kind of like a zombie really) very interesting. (I did think some things were left too vague, though (just a hint - the ants! what were they about?), but maybe I couldn't collect the information well enough, or maybe it was another 'symptom' of an imperfect storyteller - Zhan simply never did find out more.)

I loved reading a book where there was so little black or white - there were difficult choices and gray areas wherever you looked, all characters had some motives for their deeds, but they didn't make decisions any easier. There was (very little) romance and true friendship, but the leading topics of the book were revenge, betrayal and death. Do not look for HEA's here!

That said, if you'd like to read something dark and not very easily readable, but exciting and different, then I very much recommend this book!

I listened to this book in audio format and it wasn't a good choice. Firstly, although the narrator is quite good, she didn't fit the main character's role at all - she had a very young voice and would be perfect for narrating a young adult novel, but she did not sound like an old woman reminiscing her youth (she also did male characters' voices a little funnily at times - like a woman with a high voice trying too hard to make a low voice). And secondly, the nonlinear storytelling was even harder to follow than it probably would be on paper. But I won't detract a star for this, because this was my own stupid choice - the audible price was about the same as the ebook on Amazon, and since normally audio is so much more expensive, it seemed like a more reasonable buy. Let this be a lesson - don't be so greedy! ;)

This review was also published in Estonian on the blog hirveloss.blogspot.com.

Maverynthia says

I received this book from the Apex Book Minions program for an honest review.

TRIGGER WARNING: Talk of rape, Romani slurs, abuse

Honestly this book was a confusing mess to me. It jumps around in time and between people on occasion to where I just couldn't put the pieces together.

First of all I don't really know who the main character is. I think her name is Zhan, but I'm not sure. I think she might be white, still not sure. Maybe Adel was?

As for diversity this book feels like it was using a checklist.

"Brown person - check

Gypsy - check

Red head - check

Autistic person - check"

Even so lots of people in this book are described as having dark or black skin, however it seems to be different than brown skin. As lots of the bad people are described as having dark skin and being cannibals. There are even these types of descriptions "People with "nut brown" skin that speak like "frogs and chimpanzees" and have "slanted eyes". That's not the first time that description was used.

I also hope you like your Romani slurs as the word "gypsy" appears constantly when Staf Sru Korinyes shows up and then after that. Oh and she's infested with ants. I shit you not. It's why the 'gypsies' can sing so good is that they are a literal hive mind.

Then there is Partridge. Yeah that's his name. He's the autistic one that is constantly called "fool" and is beaten mercilessly into silence. Don't worry, they are both dead before the book is out. The book doesn't even describe Partridge all that much because "he was Seth's problem". Which is a damn cop out from the author considering how long this book is.

Next is Korinyes who is sexually assaulted into submission by Seth. Then they are suddenly totally soulmates or something. It was disgusting to read.

Adel is supposed to be a "strong warrior woman" but she's also threatened with rape from a "dark skinned mercenary" and needs saving by a man. She also breaks down and cries and then needs help from a man.

All this time I have no real idea what's going on in the book other than they are on some trek to somewhere. In the meantime the narrative jumps about like a stream of consciousness, first the characters are talking about one thing, then they are hungry. Damn if the characters aren't always starving and hungry. Many words are used to tell us this fact, and the fact they are freezing in the cold and how people are always puking all over the place and how gross and ugly everything is. This definitely want to be a GRIMDARK book. I do not like grimdark books.

Overall this book was a disjointed confusing mess and I really didn't understand what was going on as it jumped around between time, places and people.

Aaron says

Probably deserves 5 stars just for its wonderful puzzle like narrative and insightful themes. My attention did wane slightly after the 1st half (a novel with such an unconventional structure can feel gimmicky after a while, maybe 50-60 less pages would have tightened it up a little) as the standard fantasy tropes somehow felt more tired when displayed in a literary frame rather than less. It has been constantly on my mind since finishing it last night, so it could yet get 5 stars from me.

John says

Last Dragon is a collection of letters written by Zhan, a quasi-delirious empress on her death bed, that recounts, in nonlinear fragments, the story of how her hunt for her grandfather - who murdered most of her family - got her embroiled in a war pursuing a far-reaching political gambit.

There is much to love in this book's approach to fantasy: a thoughtful depiction of shamanism and naturalistic magic, a fascinating take on golems, well-worked-out politics and history, an interesting urban setting that avoids most of the by now silly "gritty urban fantasy" clichés, warfare that doesn't try to pawn off savagery and gruesomeness as epic deeds or manly heraldry, and a distinct lack of sentimentality. The prose is rich and lyrical and manages to avoid (most of the time) excursions into the melodramatic.

The most striking feature of Last Dragon - both its best aspect and most glaring weakness - is the narrative style, which is short dream-like bursts of story that give Zhan's story out of order, like hundreds of puzzle pieces just dumped onto a table for the reader to pick through.

There are some wonderful things that nonlinear storytelling does. For instance, when you know the particular outcome of a certain event first, or you know something that some of the other characters are not yet aware of, the subsequent recounting of all that comes before that outcome is imbued with a sense of suspense (in the Hitchcockian sense, i.e. "There's two people having breakfast and there's a bomb under the table. If it explodes, that's a surprise. But if it doesn't..."). With a certain outcome in mind, the author can go about dancing around, foiling, feinting, delaying or otherwise fucking with the reader's expectations.

This is the kind of thing I really love in Gene Wolfe's short stories and Rushdie's early novels, where you have a certain knowledge of things that happen later in the story without any sense of how they connect to earlier events, and you are reading not to find out what happens (you already know) but how, why, to whom, (and, in the case of Wolfe, if) it happens. Some of my most visceral reading experiences have been those moments where a piece of the puzzle falls into place and you say "so *that's* how we got here.

And while Last Dragon achieves this from time to time, the story often slips into place far too easily. Sure, there are loose ends and nagging questions even after turning the last page, but there would have been anyway. There's no good reason to chop up and shuffle the story this way if the reading experience isn't much different were it simply a straight telling (the dying empress on the edge of delirium provides the justification within the story to tell it this way, but there should be something about the experience of reading it this way that a straight reading would not have provided).

This aside, Last Dragon is way better than most attempts at epic fantasy I've read, and it was a good curative for everything that annoyed me in The Name of the Wind.

Hannah says

This book kicked me right in the butt. I am one of those people that stalks through bookstores throwing random books in my arms and I don't know what I was expecting when I first picked up *The Last Dragon* but I think whatever those expectations were they were probably exceeded. Yes, sometimes the time jumps DO get annoying but the style in which it is written hit me like a punch to the gut. I'll be watching for more J.M. McDermott books in the future.

