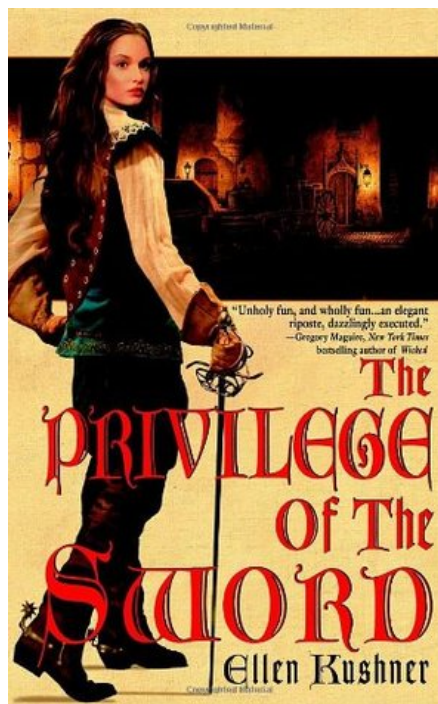




The Privilege of the Sword

Ellen Kushner

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The Privilege of the Sword Ellen Kushner

Welcome to Riverside, where the aristocratic and the ambitious battle for power in the city's ballroom, brothels and boudoirs. Into this alluring world walks Katherine, a well-bred country girl versed in the rules of conventional society. Her mistake is thinking that they apply. For Katherine's host and uncle, Alec Campion, aka the Mad Duke Tremontaine, is in charge here—and to him, rules are made to be broken. When Alec decides it would be more amusing for his niece to learn swordplay than to follow the usual path to marriage, her world changes forever. Blade in hand, it's up to Katherine to navigate a maze of secrets and scoundrels and to gain the self-discovery that comes to those who master: the privilege of the sword.

The Privilege of the Sword Details

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From Reader Review The Privilege of the Sword for online ebook

Wealththeow says

The book is set a dozen or so years after *Swordspoint*, one of my very favorite fantasy stories. Alec Champion, the Mad Duke of Tremontaine, summons his young niece to the city. He promises to alleviate her family's financial situation if she'll obey his one command—she must dress only in men's clothing and learn to fight. There are many fantasy books about young, naïve girls who learn to swordfight and defy convention, and most of them are terrible (even the Alanna series has some serious faults). This is not one of those books. Kate is initially far from pleased at her new situation, and the gradual growth of her appreciation for dueling is believable. The story starts frothily, with characters new and old whipping about, all having a grand old time double-crossing each other. But as it progresses, *Privilege of the Sword* becomes more about intimate power struggles and the right to personal freedom than just political infighting. Kate's character also deepens, and while she retains a silly streak (she has a tendency to romanticize) she becomes a very likeable character. In the background of her story are Alec and Richard St. Vier, the main characters of *Swordspoint*; hearing hints of their story percolate up is both teasing and satisfying. The very end is a little too pat for my tastes, but overall I loved this book almost as much as its prequel.

Rachel says

This is the second of the Riverside books that I've read, and I think I've figured out what is peculiar about them - they feel like fan fiction without a source text. Even *Swordspoint*, the first book, which sets up the world of Riverside and the couple, Alec and Richard, who are the clear emotional heart of that book (and in some ways of this as well, despite being in the background), seems like it is assuming our affection and investment as readers, sharing an inside joke. It works, because it's as easy to care about Richard and Alec as it is to care about some of the best fandom pairings out there, and because the short-handing gives us as readers the pleasant feeling of being a privileged audience, being in on something with them. But it's an interesting experience as a reader. I want to think about the generic traits that make this and some other fantasy feel like fic, where that originates (is it because fandom writers all learn from Kushner and others? are there shared sources to this?).

Anyway, *Privilege of the Sword* is a lot of fun, but it doesn't work as well as *Swordspoint*; there's something about it that feels tonally a little off. It might be that I find it hard to get invested in Katherine as a heroine when she is not in on the joke with us (similar problem sometimes with Kel in Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small*, when she interacts with Alanna and Daine - but that rings a little differently because the world of Tortall is more developed, and as readers we have had more time to become invested in it), or because I'm made somewhat uncomfortable by the way volition becomes unimportant in the fantasy-fulfillment narrative of her becoming a swordsman (it's what Alec wants for her, not what she wants for herself, she at first finds the requirement to change her gender presentation unpleasant and scary, and then she - accepts it? It becomes a source of pride and joy for her, and this makes some sense emotionally, but I couldn't quite get away from seeing it as her embodying Alec's dream for her, his own fantasy of a woman who can defend herself and cannot be coerced, not her own. Alec and Katherine's relationship is problematized, but by the end of the novel those problems sort of fade into the background, it's interesting).

Maybe my overall feeling upon finishing the book, that it was fun but didn't quite stick, came out the construction; the side plotlines don't really fit together for me, and, like some other reviewers, I would have preferred it to be all 1st or all 3rd pov. I also wanted it to go darker - I wasn't satisfied with the denouement of the libertine aristocrat revenge plotline, it wasn't enough for me (again like the side plotlines in *Protector*

of the Small! Hmm).

Alec and Richard remain a joy; Kushner is every effective at giving us just enough of their relationship that we still very much want more. Though I would sort of just have preferred more books straight-up about them.

Maija says

I was into this book as much as Artemisia and Katherine were into *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*.

The ending was a bit abrupt, but not out of character. I would've wanted a more intricate ending and a few more chapters. But I'm completely willing to forgive this considering how fast my heart was beating during other parts of the story, and how lost in the story and world I was.

A.R. Hellbender says

3.5 stars.

This book had a lot of things I loved about it. Everyone of significance was bisexual, it had some great conflicts, and the f/f romance was the best I've ever read, even if the 2 don't actually hook up during the story.

However, I felt a complete lack of world building, and the plot didn't really start until halfway through. The ending was also very abrupt.

Res says

The one where Mad Duke Alec brings his 15-year-old niece, Katherine, to the city to make a swordsman of her.

Very fine when it comes to Katherine's personal life; less successful in other areas.

Katherine is adorable, and her reactions rang very true to me; I especially liked how it felt for her to put on men's clothes for the first time, and how she gradually gained enthusiasm for her fate. Her sexual awakening was done very well, too.

I enjoyed seeing the dark side of sex and marriage; I have a feeling that the more Regency romances you've read and enjoyed, the more chilling it is to see the other side. But the book has a complex view of sexuality and fantasy -- repeatedly it shows the same act with radically different meanings for the participants.

It was nice to have a tiny bit of backstory on Alec, and nice to see that the author is aware that he's insane; sometimes I've wondered. I'm still not clear, though, on what he was doing by making a swordsman of Katherine; was it only to fit her for the family role, or was there some larger purpose?

I don't know what Flavia was doing there; for all the long-term significance she has, she might as well have been left out. And I object to Rose's plot being dropped at such a critical point, though of course that's setting

up for a sequel.

And the Ferris plot! To have it resolved in so blunt and hasty a fashion was a real letdown for me, and I also don't believe that Alec would have been able to walk away from such a thing with so few consequences to himself and his family. (The ending was hasty in general; I felt that two or three chapters had been left out, but maybe that's because the book was Katherine's but the climax was Alec's, so we never really got a climax for Katherine's story.)

(2007 Locus poll: #1 fantasy.)

Susanna Sturgis says

Coming surprisingly late to this one, because I love *Swordspoint* and have read it several times. The women of *Swordspoint* were vivid but usually peripheral. Here the female characters, and the role of women in this unnamed city, are in the foreground. Alec, now the Duke Tremontaine, summons his young niece, Katherine, to the city: if she will don boy's clothes and train as a swordswoman, he will alleviate her family's financial distress. Among the gentry, gender expectations are clearly delineated: the woman's primary task is to produce heirs for whatever house she marries into. So Katherine's transition from well-born country girl to swordswoman is a rough one, totally believable and ultimately rewarding for her.

As expected, Kushner's dialogue is stylish, extravagant when extravagance is called for, and often laugh-out-loud funny. It could be staged without much editing -- and indeed the theater plays a significant role in the novel. Katherine's trajectory is contrasted with that of her friend Artemisia, whose every thought and deed is devoted to making a good match -- until the reality turns out to be very different from the romantic expectations.

I especially like the relationship that develops between Katherine and Marcus, the duke's young attendant, whose background is as hardscrabble as they come. Though called to adult responsibilities, both are also adventurous and mischievous teenagers. Their evolving awareness of each other is charming.

I did find the ending somewhat abrupt. The villain's downfall would have been more satisfying had it been drawn out longer. But the endings of novels are rarely their best part, and truth to tell, *The Privilege of the Sword* could have gone on for another 200 pages and I would have been happy.

Lightreads says

About fifteen years after *Swordspoint*, young Katherine is sent from the country to her uncle the mad Duke, who has a nefarious but possibly brilliant plan to turn her into the first swordswoman.

Okay, so, it went something like this:

First 100 pages: Restless twitching, sighing, picking of fingernails. God, Ellen Kushner, are you seriously telling me you're letting me down in this universe twice?

Next 100 pages: Oh? Oh! Eeee! Well, why didn't you say so earlier? Oh, but you're still doing that thing where you think all your other characters in addition to Richard and Alek are interesting, and you're still wrong, sigh.

Last half of the book: Clever, clever book! Oh, Katherine! Oh, Alek! You are all marvelous and delightful and I love you to distraction! I take it all back – I didn't mean a word of it. Well, except for the part about the first 100 pages being boring, 'cause they kinda are. Sorry!

So, you know, forge ahead. Because this book made me so, so happy. There's clever cross-dressing and power discourse and privilege discourse and tragedy and beauty. This is a book about powerlessness and self-determination with a female protagonist who dresses as a man and becomes a swordswoman, and it's not really about gender. It's about people, and for that alone I could love it.

Sherwood Smith says

readers who have not encountered the previous books set in Kushner's Riverside could read this one first with no confusion or diminishment of pleasure. One doesn't need to know the characters' back (or forward) history; as Katherine encounters them, we do too, through her descriptions both trenchant and humane. (Though it must be said certain lines and situations inevitably will resonate more with readers familiar with the previous Riverside stories.)

Kushner begins with sixteen-year-old Katherine, whose uncle, the Mad Duke Tremontaine, offers, out of nowhere, to cancel all debts and even to help the family out of poverty if Katherine consents to live with him for six months and train with the sword. Of course she's going to take the offer—despite the fact that young ladies do not have anything to do with swords. Here are a couple of lines from the opening graf, and what swashbuckler among us can resist?

...This was before I had ever been to the city. I had never been in a duel, or held a sword myself. I had never kissed anyone, or had anyone try to kill me, or worn a velvet cloak.

And then, for the readers who know the story, that graf finishes:

I had certainly never met my uncle the Mad Duke. Once I met him, much was explained. [pause for guffaw from those who know what that means]

Katherine does indeed learn to handle a sword. But you absolutely cannot predict what is going to happen while she goes about it. Meanwhile Katherine's first-person storyline interweaves with other points of view to make a delightful whole that covers a surprising spectrum of situations and emotions. There just isn't a note wrong anywhere, the characters are vivid, the humor a splash of light amid plenty of tense moments, introspective ones, sad ones, and some with exquisite poignance.

Two observations of things that particularly impressed me: one, the true-to-life 'secret' lives of school girls who are mostly shut away from the world for their own good. These girls read and reread romantic novels in order to decode the world—novels chosen in hopes that the glorious landscape, passionate heroes (especially heroic villains) and noble emotions found there will indeed prove to be what the girls encounter when at last given the chance to take their place in the world. Their language is a private language, the characters in the romances so well known, so endlessly discussed, they prance alongside the realtime story as dream shades.

This so resonated with my own teen experience, when encountering others who adored Man from U.N.C.L.E and Lord of the Rings and Georgette Heyer and Star Trek; what's more, this phenomenon resonates right back through literary letters and fiction clear to Charlotte Lennox who, in the 1750s, gave us *The Female Quixote* about a girl who raised herself on romance. As well as Jane Austen's far more fun iteration of the same plot in *Northanger Abbey*.

The second thing that impressed me was how, as the young people encountered the worst aspects of the world—and indeed did not always escape them—they could observe, comprehend, and still retain their own integrity. How very refreshing—and how rare, unfortunately, in far too much fiction.

s.e. smith says

y'all... i love this book

Laura says

I really liked Ellen Kushner's other novels in this world, but this one was very hum-drum. Of course, I previously read the other novels about 10+ years ago, and I have changed a lot since then.

Essentially this novel is about a crazy rich man who buys his niece from his sister in order to train her as a swordsman to protect him.

The girl, Katherine, only fights in two duels in the entire novel. The last part of the book she is just a horny teenager who is attracted to her uncle's valet.

I was an athletic fencer for 4 years and I was not impressed with the descriptions of the practice, the blades and the bouts. Yawn.

I did enjoy the return of a character previously introduced in an earlier novel, but that part was too brief.

If you've read the other two novels, you may as well read this one. But don't hold your breath.

Caravaggion says

i liked this book a lot better than the first one tbh, in my opinion the characters made much more sense and again, the diversity is a+++++

Therese Arkenberg says

Alec Champion, the “Mad Duke” Tremontain, is jaded and disgusted with the behavior of his fellow nobility. Their facade of elegance and respectability is a sham, while they abuse their wealth, power, and privileges—including the privilege to sic trained swordsmen on anyone they disagree with. Alec decides to twist that latter privilege on its head by inviting his niece Kate from the countryside and training her to become his swordswoman/bodyguard.

This is a sequel to the original Riverside novel, Swordpoint, where Alec first appeared. I like him better in this new, older incarnation. He is still, as they call it, mad, but the method to his madness is much more apparent—he puts it: “I can’t make the rules, so I like breaking them.” He’s gone from being a poor student in disgrace with his family to a wealthy duke bringing disgrace on his family, using his resources guided by

his insanity to poke fun (and sometimes poke holes in) the rest of the nobility. This means, weirdly enough, that this hostile, depressing, and depressed man is making things better for everyone who isn't even more of a bastard than he is.

Then there's Katherine, who is a very sympathetic character. Compassionate and relatively astute, she's still a very ordinary, down-to-earth person who is disturbed and baffled in turns by Alec and by the rest of the city. Although in the opening I feared she might suffer from Generic YA Heroine Syndrome—she finds sewing tedious, and the plot of the book does involve her transgressing gender roles in a way that in lesser hands could devolve into “Wow, I'm so glad I'm not like those sheep-like other girls and am instead doing such wonderful masculine things—yay, feminism”—I should have expected better from Kushner. This book has a much more nuanced perspective, although I would argue it's still ultimately feminist. LGBT-positive, class-conscious feminism that recognizes there are lots of ways to be an awesome female character (in addition to Kate the swordswoman, we have a lady mathematician, a playwright, two actresses—one of whom plays men's roles or “trouser” roles—and Artemisia, who is in some ways a typical lady of this society but who escapes her gilded cage through sheer defiance, and some help from Kate). And Kate doesn't wholeheartedly embrace her “masculine” role, at least at first. Wearing men's clothes is genuinely uncomfortable for her.

There is also a great line from Kate after she sees her first duel. Her teacher worries the blood concerned her, but she points out most women see more blood every month.

Speaking of great lines, there are moments of breathtaking visuals, to the point that I got flat-out envious of Kushner's ability to do that with words. She uses an interesting technique of interspersing Kate's 1st-person POV with other viewpoints in 3rd person, for reasons I can't quite determine. It does work, though, and makes Kate that much more approachable. The wider cast of characters—including many more women—and somewhat more optimistic outlook make this book an easier read than the original *Swordpoint*. That doesn't mean it got dumbed down—if *Swordpoint* made the same sort of nuanced feminist analysis as *Privilege*, I missed it because I was trying too hard to figure out what was going on with people's indirect dialogue, sarcasm, and general nastiness.

For all that, I missed the central relationship of *Swordpoint*, at least at the start. Although it does reappear, in a way that—limiting spoilers—makes Kate's training and transformation into a very passable swordfighter much less tedious and much more believable than I feared. Training montages generally bore me, but this one was less about learning skills (although Kate did that) and more about her emotional relationship with her mentor.

Also, Alec Champion made me tear up with a line about fish. Along with probably anyone who read *Swordpoint*.

I was wondering at times if Kate would, like her uncle, enter a same-sex relationship, and there was one point which seemed very promising. In the end, I understand and like what Kushner did instead. Her heterosexual relationships are nuanced and subversive (especially the romance of Lucius Perry, a highborn man who is a prostitute in a male brothel some nights to support his relationship with a woman in a crumbling marriage). And this is not to erase the bisexual reading, which seems likely for many if not most characters.

I said this was an easy read—I that mean emotionally more than intellectually. It was extremely cathartic, so cathartic that I saved passages I knew would contain Kate kicking patriarchal behind to cleanse the nasty aftertaste of another novel I was reading at the time. Non-spoilery thoughts on the ending: very open-ended in several areas to allow for the next book, but also very satisfying for me. Although, as another reviewer pointed out, the story is Kate's, but the climax is really Alec's. This is nagging from a storytelling standpoint, although it makes a sort of sense given the events and the personalities involved (I'm sure Alec

would feel his solution is the only one available). I'll give Kate and her friends this happy ending—they certainly deserve it.

Kes says

[Lord Ferris eventua

Sean says

There are some things I liked very much about this book. The moment of the main character's first sexual awakening is both hilarious and yet also believable; there are moments of brilliant wit and biting sarcasm; there are scenes of such vicious depravity and cruelty that one's breath is taken away; and there are a few moments of tender love. One problem many sequels have—true sequels, in which previous characters appear in a new story—is that characters one has learned to love or hate, or who in any case have become familiar, are suddenly strange, foreign and altered. This book falls slightly afoul of this, but then there is a wonderfully disturbing scene in the dark in a country cottage that made the magic of *Swordspoint* come back... and besides, this book weaves its own magic quite capably, and has a different tone and purpose. So I ended up enjoying it very much, even if it wasn't *Swordspoint* rehashed.

Clouds says

Following the resounding success of my Locus Quest, I faced a dilemma: which reading list to follow it up with? Variety is the spice of life, so I've decided to diversify and pursue six different lists simultaneously. This book falls into my LOCUS FANTASY list.

As the Locus Sci-Fi Award winners list treated me so kindly, I figure I'll trust those same good folk to pick me some stars in their sister-list, the Locus Fantasy Award winners.

While I was working my way through the list of Locus Sci-Fi Award winners, I decided to dip a toe into the sister-list for Locus Fantasy winners. I ordered a trio of books from authors I'd never read before *Lavinia*, *Paladin of Souls* and *The Privilege of the Sword* – and this came second out of the three.

At heart, it's a traditional coming of age tale for our teenage heroine, Katherine, a sweet and romantic girl who dreams of getting dolled-up in pretty gown and snaring a handsome gentleman at a fancy ball. She's forced to put her own desires aside in the name of familial duty when her rich, mad uncle, the Duke, comes a-calling. His (fairly arbitrary) offer is this: she comes with him to the city, dresses only in men's clothes and learns to be a swordsman and in return he will save her family's finances.

Based on this premise, I was expecting some pretty cheesy, clichéd shenanigans and a bit of sledgehammer-subtle feminism – I was pleasantly surprised!

It's a lot more grounded and convincing than cheeseball. The mad Duke keeps things... unpredictable and sometimes pretty funny. Katherine is a very likeable lass, and as she's slowly won over by the honour and excitement of swordplay it's hard not to feel a little of her elation. The blind sword master was pretty cool –

as was his unconventional relationship with the Duke. The overall tone and spin on the regency style was lively, refreshing and fun.

This is the second in a trilogy, but I read it as a stand-alone and it holds up perfectly well. I understand the first book is set nearly twenty years earlier, so while it fleshes out the world and the duke's early life, it's not essential reading.

My main complaint with this book was the ending – I don't want to give too much away but it's abrupt, carries no emotional punch and wraps things up far too conveniently for the next book feel 'true'.

The Privilege of the Sword scores a very comfortable three star rating from me – I read it, I enjoyed every minute of it and look back on our time together with fondness, but it didn't rock my world and I didn't feel compelled to check out the prequel or sequel.

The Privilege of the Sword won the 2007 Locus Fantasy Award. The Locus Sci-Fi award that year went to *Rainbow's End* (which I didn't enjoy) and the Locus Y-A Award went to *Wint Smith*, which is my favourite of the three but not top-drawer Pratchett. Conclusion? 2007 wasn't the finest vintage for Locus award winners.

Having said that, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* was nominated that year and finished 22nd in the rankings! I wonder how that would fare if the award were given retrospectively? Might be a fun little project one day... or perhaps I have enough lists already?

Juushika says

The mad Duke Tremontaine promises to relieve his family's debt if he may train his niece in swordplay. Perhaps recycling an antagonist from *Swordpoint* is lazy; certainly there's some trailing subplots here, and it takes time for the headhopping and politicking to coalesce into a narrative. But this won me by the halfway point, and won me entirely. It's a delight to come back to this world, with its affected tone and character cameos (featuring significant growth!), and it benefits from the introduction of gender diversity. It deglamorizes the Regency-esque setting, and creates room for issues of gender presentation and social roles, for an organic sexual awakening and coming of age. The narrative-within-the-narrative is an especially nice touch; it frames *Privilege* in a self-aware but loving light, and the way that characters interact with it functions better than the subplots to explore the diversity of women's experiences within a misogynistic society. Being able to see a work's flaws and yet not care about them is evidence of a sincere, engaged joy-- and I certainly had that with this book, and love and recommend it.

Sarah says

Like *Swordpoint*, which I also loved, this novel is an extremely entertaining read that manages to provoke far more thought than I would have expected from a book that's such pure fun. I think what I loved so much about *The Privilege of the Sword* is that it manages to grant the reader the very real narrative pleasure of the comedy of manners and the swashbuckling revenge tale while at the same time illuminating the gender and class politics at the very foundations of these genres. This knowing awareness permeates the book's wry humor, especially in the scenes revolving around the fictional novel, "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death," which is both a vehicle for its society's oppressive mores and the catalyst for subversion on the part of several characters who encounter and reinterpret it. The role of popular fiction in the imaginations

and self-conceptions of these characters amounts to an incredibly smart commentary on the limitations and subversive potential of genre fiction, as well as the power of alternative readings of even the most reactionary-seeming stories. It's also a hilarious, affectionate parody of the novel's own genre. Who says that critiques of deep-seated power structures can't also be fun?

Talk about the pleasure of the text. To roughly quote a character (as the book is not in front of me): "It's full of noble truths of the heart. And swordfights!"

Darlene says

The main character of *The Privilege of the Sword* (which my husband insisted on calling the *Privilege of the Phallus*) was a delight. Katherine was fascinating, multilayered, complex. I really *liked* her. She grew from an independent, loyal and sensitive girl into a fiercely independent, fiercely loyal, and *dangerously armed* sensitive woman. Yeah!

Some of the other characters were also intriguing -- the Duke in particular (sexy and dark, yum) -- but most of the others fell flat. Additionally, I felt there were far too many characters, some introduced fairly late into the story (*The Black Rose*, for example). Kushner was clearly aiming to create a web of subplots which would demonstrate a pattern when looked at from the end of the story, but it was too much, and too muddled.

I also didn't exactly believe one of the central premises -- that Katherine would be so devoted to Artemesia after meeting her just once at a party for only a couple of moments.

The writing was capable and evocative. The sexiness was rather sexy. The setting was believable and elegantly developed. Kushner's point of view shifted a tad irresponsibly, but I was definitely engaged by the story. I looked forward to picking the book up again when I had to put it down, and often thought about the story in the meantime. I was anxious to find out exactly what the Mad Duke was up to and felt very satisfied at the end. Recommended, but I'd say Holly Black's cover blurb is a bit overstated.

Rambles On says

Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* has the distinction of being among the most intelligent and stylish fantasy novels I've ever read. As it happens, I have to go back to a very basic definition of "fantasy" to make that statement, since Kushner's universe shares no characteristics with traditional fantasy save that she made it up and it is most definitely not this world.

The Privilege of the Sword falls between the short stories "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" (which is the title of a novel and play that forms a running thread through this novel) and "Red Cloak," which come before, and "The Death of the Duke," which closes the story of Alec and Richard. Many of the characters from *Swordspoint* appear, and in fact, Alec Campion, the swordsman St Vier's mad scholar, now Duke Tremontaine, is central, as is Anthony Deverin, Lord Ferris. However, the story revolves around Katherine Talbert, Alec's niece, who, after a years-long wrangle between the Duke and the Talberts over a small inheritance which has left her mother nearly bankrupt, is part of a settlement: Katherine will come to the city to live with the Mad Duke at House Tremontaine and will have no contact with her other family for six months. In addition, she will wear the wardrobe provided by the Duke, who will also provide lessons. In her innocence, Katherine foresees a new wardrobe of fashionable gowns, a glittering round of parties and balls, and even suitors as she has her Season in town.

What she gets are men's clothes and lessons in swordsmanship: the Duke is a scandal in Society, no one wants to be seen associating with him except scholars, pickpockets, street urchins and worse, and the idea of a woman dressing in men's clothes — well, that is for actresses and the like, not the nobility. Nevertheless, gritting her teeth and remembering her duty to her family, Katherine perseveres.

In the world of the intense politics of the nobility, Lord Ferris has, after returning from his exile in Arkenveldt, married money, revived his career, and now serves as Crescent Chancellor of the Council of Lords, the highest office in the land. He is still a bitter enemy of the Mad Duke, whose only involvement in the Council is to make sporadic visits to their deliberations with the sole purpose of throwing them into complete chaos, mostly because he finds their activities to be self-serving and damaging to the country as a whole.

The Privilege of the Sword, although it certainly moves briskly enough to keep a reader's interest, is as much a novel of character as *Swordpoint*, or perhaps even more so, particularly graced as it is by the Mad Duke, who is admittedly one of my favorite characters from any realm of literature. Alec's madness is of the clear-eyed sort that calls into question all of our basic assumptions. In our terms, he is as neurotic as it's possible to be and still function, but he is also cagey, brilliant, and ruthless, and we're never quite sure where the one leaves off and the other starts. He is also an idealist and a humanitarian, and his clear-eyed vision on the follies of privilege is the starting point for much of the satire in the novel. As he says himself, "I don't make the rules. This annoys me, and so I comfort myself by breaking them." Given the ways in which he breaks them, it is the rules that come into question, not Alec. He is one of the few truly creative characters in the book, and poor Ferris, whose rule-breaking is somewhat hidebound and unimaginative, is outclassed.

The humor in the book, which is more obviously funny than I've noticed from Kushner before, is mostly the result of Alec's observations and reactions, which give us one gasp of shocked recognition after another, leading to those "oh, how true it is" head-shakings through the laughter.

Katherine provides another vehicle for sharply etched satire: a young woman, she begins the story with her head full of the things that occupy young women of her station, mainly finding a good match, which means land and money. It's here that I'm reminded most of Jane Austen's novels, with the additional virtue that Kushner's satire is more contemporary: it becomes not just a study in class, but a dissection of our whole way of thinking, even in a supposedly post-feminist world, about men and women and what their appropriate roles are. Katherine is truly liberated, albeit reluctantly, by Alec's insistence that she learn swordplay and wear men's clothes — she is also free, thereby, to get into some of the kinds of trouble that young men get into, and her adventures add another layer of intrigue to the story. It's worth noting that Katherine is the most nearly normal character I can remember Kushner coming up with — most of her people, at least the important ones, skirt the edges, but they do it in delightful ways.

There is also a touch of romance, not only a budding friendship that could be more between Katherine and Marcus, Alec's young servant, but also a quietly played scene between Alec and Richard that reveals new dimensions to their characters, as well as their vulnerabilities and their overwhelming need for to each other.

If *Swordpoint* is a perfect gem, *The Privilege of the Sword* is the gem in its full setting: elegant, wicked, funny, intelligent, and fluent. There is, as is so often the case with truly good books, much more to this one than I can possibly discuss here. Read them both. And if you can find the short stories, read those, too.

-- Rambles

Bee says

This is one of the oddest sequels I've ever read - so much time has passed, and all the characters have changed so much, but their development in the intervening decades makes perfect sense - it's like we've tossed a ball high in the air, ran a few feet with eyes closed, and caught the ball again.

These characters are some of the most richly illustrated I've ever read - they sparkle with humanity and ignorance and dark secrets. one can't help but loving all of them, for their vanity and pain and joy. specifically, the way the book articulates gender - the awful yawning power differential between men and women (especially around the institution of marriage), as well as the liberatory possibilities of breaking out.
