



## Black Light

*Elizabeth Hand*

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## **Black Light** Elizabeth Hand

The privileged daughter of famous television actors, Charlotte, "Lit, " Moylan is ready to enjoy one last wild fling before college and adulthood. In fact, the whole idyllic hamlet of Kamensic, New York, is ready to party, for legendary avant-garde film director--and Lit's godfather--Alex Kern is coming back to reopen his fabulous mansion, Bolerium. But it won't be just any party. It'll be the event of all time. The whole town is invited, young and old, famous and obscure. But other, more disturbing guests are arriving, too--seen at the edges of the forest, at the margins of the night. Kern's connections extend far beyond Hollywood, beyond even the modern age . . . and in Bolerium's echoing halls a fearsome confrontation is gathering, between ancient powers of the darkness and those sworn to stop them at any cost, no matter what--or who--the sacrifice...even an innocent girl.

## **Black Light Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2000 by HarperTorch (first published 1999)

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Author : Elizabeth Hand

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## From Reader Review Black Light for online ebook

### Quentin says

A strange and surrealistic book about growing up in a small town, ancient magic, and punk rock. A teenage girl (Charlotte "Lit" Moylan) growing up in the 1970s in the fictional town of Kamensic, New York, gradually discovers that her godfather, the reclusive filmmaker and impresario Axel Kern (a stand-in for Andy Warhol) is at the center of a magical conspiracy that has lasted for millennia. She becomes part of a fight between two opposing groups of magicians, seeking to halt (or hasten) the revival of an ancient God. Along the way, she parties with her friends, and tries to figure out whether the small-town life she's grown up with is what she really wants for herself.

It was a fun book, and I particularly enjoyed the stunning and strange descriptions of Lit's visions. It was also a love letter to the strange art and musical world of the 1970s, with which I am more than a little enamored. Parts of it made little sense to me, and I sometimes found myself wondering about Lit's motivations, both personal and cosmic. Still, it was a fun read, by turns creepy and exhilarating.

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### Rebecca says

I wanted to like this so much more than I did. The premise was excellent: two groups of magicians with very different approaches to magic and history vying for control of ... something, the world maybe?

It was delightfully atmospheric. Every time you turn around there were autumn leaves, poppy seeds, acorns, and ivy twining all over everything. The rich, somewhat scary, organic autumn of it reminded me a bit of Something Wicked This Way Comes by Ray Bradbury or Tam Lin by Pamela Dean. But both those books deal with autumn and bildungsroman better than Black Light. At the end of the day there was too much atmosphere and not enough plot. Things didn't seem to make sense and never got very properly explained.

But worst of all was that the main character, a girl named Lit, seems to stagger from scene to scene with little agency and less common sense. She mostly questions other characters but doesn't take much action. She follows all sorts of shady folks into super shady situations without questioning whether that's a good idea. When she gets cornered by various creepers intent on some kind of sexual ritual and/or assault, she often starts protesting but then gives in. Why on earth would you ever think it's a good idea to join your godfather, even in his Dionysus incarnation form, in a sex and blood ritual? That's just a legitimately terrible idea. Early in the book, when she's just cutting school and smoking pot, her choices made sense to me. But in the end she runs off to live in a loft in New York with someone she's known for about a week. Escape may be the way, but this seems like a poorly thought out plan. Also, if you can create portals, why do you need to catch a train?

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### Bryan Wigmore says

This is a book of two linked parts. The first is about sixteen-year-old Charlotte's life growing up in a seventies small town in upstate New York, a particular town peopled by actors and hippies and ruled over by a mysterious mansion owned by a slightly Warhol-like film director. I really liked this part. Charlotte (or

"Lit") is an engaging and realistic character, and though you wouldn't necessarily want to live near these people, they're interesting to read about, and there's an interesting occult-ish vibe to the setting that makes you wonder what is stirring below the surface.

This is answered in the second half of the book, which is mostly about a party given by the director, in which reality as Lit knows it starts breaking down, and she finds herself in a mythical tableau to do with the battle between the primal forces of order and chaos. The ideas in this part are actually more interesting to me, but it's hard to get a grip on what's really going on, or why, or sometimes where. The whole second half is quite phantasmagorical, and well-written, but perhaps needed a bit of reining in: order imposed on the chaos, as it were.

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### **Audrey says**

I like Elizabeth Hand's work in general. I think she does an excellent job of capturing a time and place that exists both inside and outside of pop culture at the same time. This one had everything I was expecting -- an art/movie/music scene set in the 60s/70s, a heavy influence of God/Goddess cults, lush and sometimes psychedelic writing -- but I didn't LOVE it. It drug on through a number of scenes, particularly the info-dumps that happened in the portal scenes. I also can't decide if I've read this one before, or if it just felt familiar because it had so much of what I expect an Elizabeth Hand novel to have -- it all just felt so familiar through the whole book.

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### **Leslee says**

Started out so promising - a secret cult, an underground director a la Andy Warhol and the factory - a massive party with a sinister purpose that could bring about an end to the world as we know it - and yet this didn't really pop as much as fizz like a bad batch of microwave popcorn for me.

The last two thirds of the book just meandered annoyingly around a protagonist that was neither interesting nor engaging and I felt that the overarching storyline of Gods and Demons got a bit too 'otherworldly' and lost a lot of its appeal. The beginning of the novel promised a kind of grimy, gods amongst mortals doing dirty things storyline, but it just took way too long to get to the climax and once we were there - I felt like as a reader I was just carried along and got lost somewhere in the ether.

I didn't realize that when I picked this up it was written as a prequel to another novel that, judging from the reviews, is better than this one. I'll check that one out and hope for something that better lives up to its promise.

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### **Melanti says**

This is the prequel to the lovely *Waking the Moon* with similar themes and much the same vibe. Most of what I said about that one applies here as well: "Part fantasy, part gothic horror, part mythology, part twisted love story. It's dark, lush, sensual, and quite creepy in places."

However, while I found it more empowering than the previous book (woo hoo! the main female can DO

something! On her own!), it wasn't nearly as heartbreaking. There's no "I'll love you next time, I promise", no grand passions, and really, no lasting attachment on my part to the characters. It's a good book, just not up to the standard of *Waking the Moon*.

Also, I have to point out that henna is not a commercial hair dye... You can't just prepare it, apply it, rinse, and be done in an hour. You have to mix it, let the dye sit and soak for a few hours, apply it, then let the mud sit on your head for at least an hour! It's something that takes an afternoon, not something that can be done on a whim as you're getting ready for a party. If someone had tried to mix/apply the henna as Ms. Hand described, they might get a faint, faint orange tint, but it probably wouldn't be worth mentioning.

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## P. says

Closer to 4 stars, but not quite because I got kind of bored in the middle, and the pace was off at the end.

When I started Black Light it felt like just what I wanted to read. It was a Sunday morning. I'd slept in too long. I felt vaguely headachey. To fall into a decadent party thrown by an Andy Warhol-like film director figure (except more violent and Artaud-ish) was so deliciously right. Seen through the eyes of his goddaughter, Axel Kern's living/work space called "The Nursery" (b/c so many of his followers took plant names for themselves) immediately reveals its primitive, sinister bones. Charlotte ("Lit") only ten or so years old at the time, is taken to the party by her parents, who are actors, and abandoned among the drug use and orgies. She wanders into a green room with a disturbing painting on the wall (I pictured something like Saturn Devouring his Child but more abstract) with the sound of leaves in the wind, and giant seedpods on the floor. She has an encounter with Kern's strung-out high society superstar (obvs like Edie Sedgwick) who brandishes a bone knife and says that they're the same. Later that month, she ODs.

Fast forward to Lit as a teenager, slouching around Kamensic, the NYC adjacent town where she lives, along with many other children of the actors who live there. The town is loomed over by the Bolerium, Axel Kern's giant estate, which somehow has been there since before Plymouth. The story unfolds as Lit begins to see where she fits in Kern's plan, and what he believes he really is. There's a whole part about the academic forces of good and evil, visions of the past, rebirth and reincarnation, giant stags, and some seriously eerie imagery.

Hand's strength lies in atmosphere and environment. Characterization is there, but it is often told and not shown, or maybe Lit and her cohort are too bored and jaded with their lives to give the reader much in the way of personality. I think that's why I had trouble keeping my attention on the page. The descriptions are enticing, but the plot beneath the descriptions was ultimately too thin to latch onto.

The descriptions, though, did make a world that will stick in my unconscious, or seemed to come from it. Here's one of them

"I was in one of those labyrinthine oak-paneled passages that wound through Bolerium like the trails bored by deathwatch beetles, opening upon anterooms and stairways, pocket libraries and maprooms, and even upon a tiny private chapel where it was said Acherley Darnell had been shriven the night before his execution. As a child I had sometimes wandered in these halls, when the adult conversation bored me and I'd tried unsuccessfully to find my way to the kitchen in search of normal food, rather than the robust and inedible spreads that Axel and my parents loved: morels, imported truffles and dark bread, venison studded with juniper berries; fiddleheads and shad roe.

"But I could never make any sense of the corridors. Sometimes I found the kitchen, and Axel's housekeeper would give me turkey sandwiches and a glass of milk before sending me back. But just as often I would wander for what seemed like hours, futilely jiggling doorknobs, climbing narrow stairways where the ceiling grazed my head, staring out lead-paned windows onto the slope of Muscanth Mountain and the distant play of light upon the lake. Eventually, of course, I always found my way back; but ever after was haunted by dreams of dim passages, muted voices speaking behind walls; doors I could never quite open and worlds I could not understand.

"Now I felt that same dread returning. And I was starving. So I went on, trying to ignore the pulse of music from behind the walls, the flicker of movement behind half-closed doors. In front of one there was a stack of unopened mail that came up to my waist; by another someone had dumped an ashtray. The walls held some of the artifacts scattered throughout Bolerium like the detritus of a fabulous library. Old, sepia-tinted photographs of places in western England: Land's End, the Lizard, a group of standing stones called The Merry Maidens. A huge gilt frame that held an oil painting in the style of Landseer, its colors so dark I had to squint to determine its subject: ravening hounds and an embattled stag, the deer poised upon the edge of a cliff with its head thrown back. An engraved brass plaque gave its title, 'AT BAY.' (141)

In fact, I liked it enough that I want to seek out more of Hand's writing. When I read this I felt the excitement I would have felt reading it as a teenager.

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### **Laura says**

It started out strongly, but about 2/3 the way in, I just lost interest in the characters and their storylines. I have little patience for beautiful, rich teenagers who are the chosen ones.

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### **Mark Altosaar says**

I received this book a couple years ago from a Humble Bundle of sci-fi written by women. I felt I'd fallen off the genre hard, and wanted some new out-of-context stuff I had no familiarity with.

I struggled with this book. I had a lot of trouble keeping up with what was going on, and frankly I think the author is just a lot more imaginative than I am. She could offer detailed flowery descriptions ... that just fell flat for me.

Roughly half-way through I consulted other reviews to reset myself and make sure I was following the story. Interestingly, I got the impression that many fell off the book half-way through, citing bad-pacing and not caring about the characters.

I had an opposite reaction, and half-way through I felt the plot really started to come together and explain all the tendrils I couldn't follow before. As well, the story does address the unrelatable characters quite well I think.

All told, I wasn't a huge fan, but I thought there was enough going on that I would definitely read other books by Elizabeth Hand. I may have suffered too in that this particular book was a sequel to *Waking The Moon*. I don't know how important it is to have read that book first, but it's kind of odd that it was omitted

from this Humble Bundle collection.

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### **Darlene Williams says**

#### **This is a Different Kind of Horror Story**

The flow of the novel, the language and story line are all well above the norm. I happen to love the '70's and enjoyed the setting very much. I was raised in the Hudson River Valley and could vividly picture the scenes. The castle reminded me of Dick's Castle, just outside of Coldsping, NY. I'm looking forward to reading more of Hand's novels.

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### **Lisa Grabenstetter says**

I really don't know how I feel about this. I started out REALLY liking it, but it hopped the rails at some point and though I liked the ending I'm not entirely sure it absolved the book of some of the more uncomfortable parts. I'll have to sleep on it I think.

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### **Charlene says**

Book 2 in the series ... Anything Elizabeth Hand writes for adults will get you thinking, will twist you around. Perhaps make you think about things in a different angle.

my, why didn't I discover Elizabeth Hand earlier? Here is a mystery and a protagonist (antagonist) that is so different from anything you have encountered before, magically, described with the eye of the artist. ... And there are 2 more books in this series too bad my library does not have the latest one....  
Ms. Hand is that rare writer, who can jump between genres ad succeed at whatever she does. Though at times you are a bit amazed at where the story takes you.

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### **Alexandra K says**

Elizabeth Hand writes SFF with folkloric/mystical elements and beautiful prose. This is extremely my jam and I've really enjoyed some of her previous work. HOWEVER, Black Light fell short for me, and I'm not sure why. All the elements I love are still there - Hand's prose is lush yet tense, and Teenage Me would have \*loved\* all the folklore references - but the second half of the book seemed to take \*forever\* and I had to force myself to get through it.

Still, I definitely recommended if you like beautifully-written, creepy SFF with folklore references and weird magic. Maybe this will hold up better upon a reread?

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## **Virginia says**

Elizabeth Hand! Elizabeth Haaaaaaaand! Her books are like food for the dark, gooey parts of my brain. So histrionic and full of dirt and bad behavior. Cruel gods and a wholly incomprehensible love of 1970s fashion. Hyperbolic, stylish, mean.

Recommended for insomniacs trying to make up for lack of sleep by drinking too much coffee. It's the same kind of unbalanced, vibrating buzz.

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## **Caitlin says**

This is a follow-up to Hand's amazing & wonderful *Waking the Moon*. The themes are similar & Balthazar Warnick makes an appearance which is nice for those of us fond of the other book & this character.

I guess this is categorized as horror, although I've never really been able to decide what category Hand is in. She's in her own category with slightly psychedelic & overtly lush writing & odd twisty plots that meander through myth & modernity.

Just as in *Waking the Moon*, the idea here is that there is an ongoing struggle between the followers of order & those of chaos. In both books the main character is asked to choose between the two &, quite simply, refuses to do so.

*Black Light* throws the world of the '70s into clear relief as it explores the world of these sheltered & maybe not so privileged teenagers. Privilege is in a very sense a limiting (& sometimes deadly) box for all them. In this sense Hand's characters recognize that hewing to a single path is full of pitfalls & she allows them to pick their way through the forest in unique & different ways.

I've always related to her themes of difference, of lost & renewed love, of refusal to give in - that she is so interested in music & mythology is a huge bonus. I very much enjoyed this book & recommend it to anyone who spent their time as a teenager with Anais Nin, Rimbaud, & Iggy Pop in their heads. It's pretty fun for everybody else, too.

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