



Living with Ghosts

Kari Sperring

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The dazzling debut from a brilliant new fantasy talent.

This highly original, darkly atmospheric fantasy novel immerses readers in a world where ghosts and other malevolent spirits seek entry into mortal realms—invisible to all but those who are not entirely human themselves. Drawn into the ancient city of Merafi, yet barred from entering by an ancient pact sealed in blood, these hungry haunts await their opportunity to break through the magical border and wreak havoc on the city's innocent denizens.

And as a priestess and prince weave a sorcerous plot to shatter the pact and bring ruin on Merafi, only a failed assassin-priest who is now a courtesan, a noble lord married into the ruling family of Merafi, an officer of the city guard, a woman warrior who was the former lover of a now-dead lord, and the ghost of that lord himself stand between Merafi and the tidal wave of magic that may soon bring ruin flooding down upon the city.

Living with Ghosts Details

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Author : Kari Sperring

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From Reader Review *Living with Ghosts* for online ebook

ambyr says

This was basically everything I look for in a book: dense, atmosphere writing; a broad cast of flawed characters occasionally at cross-purposes but all meaning well; a plot that flings you into a set of established relationships and settings without a roadmap and lets you work out answers for yourself. And yet it didn't, quite, work for me. I think part of the problem was that the city never really came alive for me as a place; what started out as mysterious hints about its culture and history and diplomatic relations all more or less ended as mysterious (and irrelevant) hints, because ultimately the story's focus is very narrow indeed. I wanted to see more, to understand why the city's destruction would be a loss to the world, to empathize with those who died as people and not as statistics. (The protagonists are people, of course, but they make up a very narrow subset.)

There are also interesting things with gender going on here, and I'm not entirely sure how I feel about them. On the one hand, this is a world in which power largely lies in the hands of women, and the men spend a lot of time pining, neglected and abandoned for duty and other loyalties. On the other hand . . . this is a book concerned with the actions of the powerless, which means that after putting all the power in the hands of women it promptly spends almost all of its pages on the men. (view spoiler) I *like* those men, but it still felt like a bit of a double-cross to be introduced to all these interesting women and then promptly spend almost no time with them.

Ultimately, I enjoyed the book, but I'm hesitant to recommend it. I will be seeking out the author's later work, though.

Mely says

Delicious fantasy city, somewhat reminiscent of the Paris of *The Three Musketeers*, and complex characterization that offers gender-swapped takes on romance clichés. (I particularly enjoy the stern, repressed, dutiful chancellor who is afraid to show her true feelings for her handsome, feckless young groom, because she thinks he married her only for security. He is, of course, desperately pining for her, but thinks she mostly considers him the playmate of her dead younger brother.) Sadly, however, the exception to all the excellent characterization is the protagonist, who is pure adolescent wish fulfillment, an angst-ridden impossibly beautiful male prostitute and former assassin priest with vast magical powers. Every single person who meets him falls in lust with him at first sight.

To compound my frustration, (view spoiler). This left a particularly sour taste because I had initially been so taken by the clever subversions of gendered romance characterization tropes.

Aliette says

A tale of a city under siege and the people who struggle to preserve it; of deep magics and the sacrifices we have to make to save what we believe in. I think neither the title nor the cover do this any justice, as (to me at

least) they imply a much smaller, intimate canvas; and while the novel does have intimacy in spades (and wonderfully focuses on relationships of love and friendship between the living and the dead--I loved the captain's ghost who accompanies Gracielis), it's also spread across a much larger, epic canvas of a city besieged by ghosts and slowly rising magic.

I think one of the things Kari Sperring excels at, in addition to lush, evocative prose that reminded me of Patricia Mckillip, is texture and world building: it's one of the few books where I genuinely had the feeling that the world felt lived in; that I could walk the streets and ask for a chocolate with Gracielis, or visit the palace and Yvellaine's political intrigues--and part of it is the characters, but part of this is Kari Sperring's skill at showing us the spread of the world, and giving us a sense of the daily life of a variety of social classes across the world.

Very much recommended. This deserves a larger audience.

Heidi Cullinan says

This book's strengths lie in a love of description, politics, and court intrigue, and in the character Gracielis. It was worth reading (and I kept reading only) for him, and his arc did pay off. Gracielis is a whore owned by a sorceress, taking clients in both women and men for his living while he also plays spy for his mistress. But when he realizes her plans threaten the city he has come to call home, he makes a break from her, and this is the story I enjoyed reading.

But this story was not the main thread of the book; in fact, there was no real main thread of the book, which was why the ending felt so flat, I suspect, though I suppose I saw it coming. I'm not sure if it's meant to be "beautifully tragic" or something, or simply to entice me into another volume; I'm afraid that it won't. I only cared for Theirry and Gracielis, and even their characters could have stood more development. There were far too many in the cast, and too poorly looped together. The mythology was difficult to grasp, and the relationships were even more difficult to keep track of. In many ways, it struck me as a story which seemed to either think it was beautiful and therefore didn't need to explain itself, or the elusiveness and mistiness of the plot and characters were intentional, viewed as part of the charm. Not so for me.

However, I give the book three stars instead of two because I very, very much enjoyed Gracielis's arc. I wish the story would have been more pinned down and would have served character more than whatever it is it was attempting to serve. But I very, very much enjoyed Gracielis and Theirry's relationship, both for its distance and its fleetingness, even though I did want them together in the end. I'm glad Ms Sperring chose to portray a male/male relationship in such a light, particularly because neither male was exactly homosexual. In the end the story disappointed, but at the same time I don't feel it was time poorly spent.

Jacey says

This is a gorgeous multi-layered work with a cast of characters which includes the city of Merafi - as much a part of this as are Gracielis, failed Tarnaroqui assassin-priest now courtesan and spy; Thiercelin, husband of one of the Queen's closest advisors and feeling like a spare part most of the time; Joyain, loyal soldier, out of his depth, just trying to keep it all together; Valdarrien, slain in a duel, but not yet gone.

And then there's Merafi, a city of many contrasts, prosperous and rich with shipping, merchants, artisans and courtesans. The Queen and the high houses on the hill overlook the Low City with her toes in the river, dank,

damp, dark and decaying, yet thriving despite it all - until the upstart Prince Kenan of the Lunedith and Quenfrida, the Tranaroqui spy mistress conspire to remove the bonds of ancient magic allowing the river to rise, setting free the opaque ghosts and demons, invisible to the Merafiens, but plain as day to Gracielis. The river's floodwaters bring pestilence and violence, and while loyal Joyain tries to do his duty, only Gracielis can end it - if he wants to. But Gracielis is in thrall to Quenfrida, while at the same time drawn to help Thiercelin, Thiercelin is driven by the apparent disregard of his wife, and haunted by the memory of his dead friend, Valdarrien. Valdarrien, by now more than a revenant spirit, grows even stronger and seeks a way back to find his lost love, Iareth. Iareth is in the retinue of the prince, but also playing a dangerous double game by spying on him for her father, the Lunedith spymaster.

Gracielis knows the final solution requires a sacrifice, but who? Thiercelin is horribly afraid that he might know.

Complicated? Yes, or say rather complex, because all this unfolds at an almost leisurely pace, drawing out the tension to almost unbearable pitch before we finally get resolution. It's not a happy ever after ending, but it does resolve and resolves well, with some characters left standing, but not all.

This is Kari Sperring's debut novel. She's a bona fide medieval historian with many academic books to her credit, and a self-confessed lover of the France of the Three Musketeers. Her writing is as elegant, as complex and as multi-layered as her characters and plot. Highly recommended.

Kelly says

Bumping this up a half star to 4.5--I rated it 4 when I finished it, but the more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

Living with Ghosts begins when a nobleman, Thiercelin, seeks out a male courtesan, Gracielis, to help him with a problem — he's been seeing the ghost of his dead best friend Valdarrien. Gracielis has the ability to see ghosts. His uncanny abilities go beyond that, as it happens; he once trained for a shadowy priesthood known as the undarii. But he shied away from the final initiation and sees himself as a failure. What he knows about the supernatural, though, tells him that Valdarrien's appearance in the city of Merafi is a bad sign. Merafi was intentionally built in a place that dampens magic, and this effect was amplified by a long-ago blood sacrifice enacted by the founder of the current ruling dynasty. If ghosts are appearing outside a few specific circumstances, it's a sign that Merafi's protections are unraveling.

This ties in, it turns out, with a plot against the throne. As the boundaries between the living and the dead begin to break down, a small group of reluctantly entangled characters are the only ones who can save the city. All are complex, flawed characters whose past mistakes come to bear on the current situation, and all of them change and develop throughout the novel. They are connected to each other in an intricate web of relationships: friends, relatives, ex-lovers.

This web of relationships is complex enough that it could be confusing for some readers, especially when the names are added in; Sperring's character names are a mouthful, and most have a nickname too. For example, Valdarrien becomes Valdin and Yvelliane becomes Yviane. Perhaps the most confusing is that Illandre and Allandur are the same family name, in the Merafien and Lunedithin languages respectively. Pronounced

aloud, it makes sense, but reading it in print, I was embarrassingly slow to pick up on that. There's also a political situation to grasp, and so it's a fair amount of knowledge for a reader to absorb. Sperring makes the wise decision to develop the plot slowly and gradually during these initial chapters. This is one case where a slow start is extremely helpful. We aren't thrown into an epic battle, for example, without figuring out who the players are first. Sperring also builds the mood during these chapters; the incessant rain at first just seems like a fitting backdrop for the characters' troubled moods, but then evokes its own dread as the nature of Merafi's protections is revealed and one considers what effect the rain might have upon them.

After that, the deluge — pardon the ancien regime pun, but it seems fitting as Merafi is clearly influenced by Bourbon France. The magic in *Living with Ghosts* is mysterious and elemental. It reminds me of something George R.R. Martin said about magic in fantasy fiction in an interview: *"I can tell you generally that when treating with magic in fantasy, you have to keep it magical. Many fantasy writers work out these detailed systems, and rules, and I think that's a mistake. For magic to be effective in a literary sense, it has to be unknowable and strange and dangerous, with forces that can't be predicted or controlled. That makes it, I think, much more interesting and evocative. It functions as a symbol or metaphor of all the forces in the universe we don't understand and maybe never will."* This is that kind of magic, and once in a while it's confusing but overall it works — and may just send shivers down your spine. The characters, as mentioned above, grow and change throughout the story. This is both a reaction to the events and a force that helps shape the events. For example, Gracielis must overcome his feelings of inadequacy if he's to help save the city; and the way the river's nature and Valdarrien's emotional state weave together at the climactic moment is simply perfect and heartbreaking.

Living with Ghosts is the kind of book about which one might say, "this is the sort of thing you will like, if this is the sort of thing you like." There's a certain type of decadent, historically-influenced, character-driven, political, and often urban fantasy that I deeply enjoy and that is sometimes hard to find. Definitely give Sperring a try if you like Jacqueline Carey, Ellen Kushner, and Lane Robins. The writing is beautiful, the characters are well-drawn, and the story is scary and tragic and deeply romantic, without being a romance (i.e. no tidy happily-ever-after here).

(The Kindle edition of *Living with Ghosts* has one slightly annoying flaw: some of the line breaks that denote point-of-view shifts are missing. Most of the time it's easy to reorient yourself, but in one scene toward the end, I briefly thought Joyain had actually morphed into Valdarrien via magic, which would have been a huge plot twist! But it was just a missing line break.)

Katharine Kerr says

I love rich, detailed worlds and complex characters. I am not a "fun fast read" person. Keep that in mind when I say I loved this book. Sperring has created a city -- Merafi -- along with its politics and its inhabitants, that seems so real I kept thinking I was reading a historical novel. Except of course for the ghosts and the well-realized magicks that haunt Merafi's present and its past.

Gracielis, the main viewpoint character, is a male courtesan who takes both men and women as clients -- a refreshing change from the usual "happy hooker" wenches in fantasy fiction. He sees ghosts as well, and both his profession and the visitations keep him on constant guard. The city, however, is in a way the main character, and it's as deeply emperiled by hostile magicks as any princess in a fairy tale.

Sperring is a medieval historian by training. Her prose and her eye for detail are both excellent.

Mike Shevdon says

I had the pleasure of hearing Kari Sperring read from the sequel to this book at FantasyCon a couple of years back and have come to know Kari since then. When it was announced that she had won the **Sydney J. Bounds Award for Best Newcomer** at the British Fantasy Awards in 2010 for this novel, she was reportedly surprised by the award, but it was well-deserved.

This doesn't feel like a debut novel. The writing is rich and gently lyrical. The setting and the sense of place is palpable - at times you can smell the air (not always a pleasant experience). The characters are complex and diverse with different cultures showing through. There is a complex political situation which is revealed throughout the book, underpinned by the personal relationships between the characters. It's subtle, complex and full of political intrigue.

There are a lot of characters, but it never feels lost or unfocused. The interweaving of motives and interests are always shifting so that it's hard to tell hero from villain. When the story comes to a climax in the final chapters you really don't know who's going to come out on top - not everyone survives it, but to say more would spoil the tale.

If you like fantasy with a richly embroidered society, meticulous world-building, ambiguous characters that you can love and hate at the same time and a plot full of intrigue, this is for you.

Julie Czerneda says

I cannot believe it's taken me this long to pull Kari Sperring's first book out of my to-read pile, but I'm so glad I did. Compulsive, rich, evocative, original fantasy, with a setting so utterly convincing I shivered in the rain.

If you're late to the party too? Waste not a minute! Start reading this author. I'm off to pull her next book out. I know I'll enjoy it.

Sherwood Smith says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Imagine a book that employs the term bourgeois, without the connotations of Marxism. With one word an entire cultural milieu is set up. Another surprise: cremornes, or as I am used to spelling it, krummhorn.

Marafi is not Paris, nor does Sperring lift French ancien regime culture and plop it into a fantasy world. But her years of reading French history shows in the interactions, the wit and style. I can so see the duc du Grammont, for example, looking around and feeling at home.

The magic is woven subtly into the story: one is not aware of the effect until quite far along, then everything snaps into place, jolting the tension nicely. There was one small bump, when two characters willfully didn't communicate, verging on the frustration of the dreaded "Big Mis" but so much else is going on that I skated right past. Iareth! Gracielis! Miraude! I loved all these characters, loved the world, and loved the poignancy

of the story. Sperring goes on my "Get next book as soon as it comes out" list.

Joshua Palmatier says

I finished this late last night. This is the debut novel of Kari Sperring and so I picked it up because of that. I try to help support new authors as much as possible by buying their books and trying them out. And with this one, I was not disappointed.

The atmosphere is the best part of this book, combined with the characters. The entire novel is set in the city of Merafi which has been free of ghosts and other magical aspects for generations due to a pact made in blood ages past and also by the fact that magic users are essentially illegal in the city. However, something has begun unraveling that ancient pact and now ghosts are appearing on the streets, along with strange mists and other fell creatures within them, and even nature itself seems to be against the city. It rains constantly, there are mists nearly every night, and the river water is rising, bringing with it plague and death. All of this is the atmospheric backdrop of the novel.

What draws you into the story is the style and the characters set against this backdrop. The main character is Gracielis, a courtesan and spy, who becomes unwillingly entwined with the lives of Thierry, the ghost Valdarrien, Iareth, Joyain, and a few others. I like how the individual lives of these characters--all seemingly separate--begin to slowly come together and cross, so that the actions of one affects them all. I also like that the lives of the characters do not necessarily end where a fantasy novel would typically have them end. So if you read the book, don't expect the usual outcomes for all of the characters. You'll be surprised.

I did have one problem with the novel, nothing that detracts from it to the point where I wouldn't recommend it to others though. I did not feel that I had a good idea or handle on how the magic in the world worked, even by the end of the novel, when all of the power comes to a head. I spent a good amount of time on some of the more heavily descriptive scenes involving magic and while I have a sense of what the magic is like and how it behaves, I couldn't explain it. It isn't as concrete or solid and I'd like as a reader. That said, it's certainly intriguing, which is probably why I'd like to understand it better.

In the end though, it was the lives of the characters that I was mainly interested in, not the magic, so I had not problem shrugging the magical system's inner workings aside and focusing on the characters instead. Great setting, great atmosphere, a style of writing that was reminiscent of old England and France, and interesting characters with lives and feelings and desires of their own. The vagueness of the magical system did not detract much from all of this at all. I'd definitely recommend the book to others. It's a strong debut novel and I'll be picking up Kari Sperring's next book when it comes out.

Rachel Thompson says

Merafi is a city once immune to the presence of ghosts and those with gifts to see them, but now dark magic is being unraveled, allowing in those which have passed on. Gracielis, a failed assassin priest, now a courtesan and spy denies his strange abilities, but he can't ignore the ghost that shadows him, nor the sorceress who rules him. Thiercelin longs for his wife's love, but most of her time is spent overseeing the governing of Merafi while the queen is slowly dying. This leads Thiercelin to great risks to try to gain back that which he has lost. Deadly mist wraiths appear in the city, threatening the lives of its citizens, while

Valdarrien's ghost grows stronger.

The best part of this book is Gracielis, a really likable character. At first he refuses to defy the woman he's sworn allegiance to, but as bonds grow stronger between him and Thiercelin, Gracielis realizes what's truly important.

Madly Jane says

Wow, this is one of the best adult fantasies that I've read in a long time. I absolutely loved it and will reread it as soon as I can. It's the story of a nobleman, Thiercelin, the love he has for his wife who is a busy politician, his relationship with her brother, Valdarrien, and a courtesan/priest, a man by the name of Gracielis, and a few other characters, all of who have POVs. This is a dark tale about a woman who wishes to take over the city of Merafi, first by destroying it. There's magic, the kind I love, hidden, mysterious, and never really explained. There are several love stories going on, all of which I loved and then there is the evil coming. The dead are coming back. Ghosts appear, the waters of river rise, and so much more.

Very good books, atmospheric, clever, and emotional, with a very satisfactory ending. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED TO ANYONE**, age 14 and up who loves really good fantasy novels. No saving the world here, just saving a city and the lives of its citizens. Heartbreaking love stories, really sensual and romantic.

And I adored Valdarrien. Give me that man anytime!

colleen the convivial curmudgeon says

I don't really know what to say about this book - I can't capture the essence of my feelings regarding it because I'm not really sure what they are. I guess that's fitting, since it was hard to pin down the feel of the book in general...

I liked most of the characters, though I liked Valdin much better as an idea as he was described than as a materialized character, because he wasn't anywhere near as charmingly rakish as one might've hoped. I liked Gracielis a lot, and Maude was cool. Amalie was really sweet. I liked Thierry sometimes. Sometimes I liked Yvelliane, and sometimes I wanted to smack her. Kenan was just annoying, and Quena was good at the start, but then became too much of a cheesy villian. (And, my gods, the names. There should seriously be pronunciation dictionaries if fantasy authors are going to insist on continuing to use unpronounceable names...)

I think one of the biggest problems was that there was too much description, too much lingering over people's feelings and inner-thoughts - which normally I like in a book, except they were so damned repetitive. Thierry missed Yvellaine and wanted to talk to her, but no, he couldn't - he would prove himself. Yvellaine kept chastising herself and moping, but then forced it aside for her duty. Gracielis kept longing for/hating Quena, and doubting himself... Over and over and over again...

We heard about the formation of the clans and Merafi how many times? How many times do we need to hear that the river is turning against Meragi before we're meant to get the import of it? How many times can I say the same critique before you get the point? ;)

Then it finally started to get really good... the action was intensifying, the long drawn-out set up was finally coming together, the drama was rising... and then... total anti-climax. Parts that could've been lingered over, like the final confrontation and the sacrifice - almost totally glossed over or written in a nigh incomprehensible manner. (There were more than a few times throughout the book I had to reread a passage because of the overly florid prose.) Pages and pages and pages of saying the same thing - and then *bam*. There's no real pay off, and that left me feeling so cheated.

Not cheated enough to hate the book, though, because, really, it's not like I was that invested in it in the first place.

I'm rating it three stars instead of lower because I liked the idea of the story. The setting was decent, and, as I said, I did like most of the characters, even if the characterization was a bit all over the place sometimes. I liked the relationships, mostly, and how they were developed. But, overall, the execution just wasn't there, and the big climax was so wasted.

ETA: 5/11/11

I'm bumping this up to 3 1/2 stars because I find myself thinking about it from time to time, and a book that stays with you like that deserves a bit of a bump.

Wealththeow says

Thiercelin begins seeing his best friend Valdarrien again, six years after he was killed in a duel. Thiercelin is a sensible man, and like all sensible men of his time does not believe in ghosts. Nevertheless, the apparition seems so real that he is forced to take it seriously. He seeks counsel from Gracielis, a man who was once his wife's lover but is now a courtesan and double (triple? quadruple?) agent. Gracielis is Tarnaroqui, a people rumored to have traces of fey blood, and unlike Thiercelin, he has made a lifetime study of the supernatural. But, bound as he is to his mentor, the perfidious Quenfrida, Gracielis refuses to help Thiercelin. Slowly, it becomes clear that Valdarrien's ghost is just one part of a rising tide of magic that threatens to break the rational city of Merafi. Gracielis reconciled himself to the fact that he does not have the powerful will needed to be a great magician long ago. But when Merafi and his friends and lovers are threatened, he knows he has to do something. And so against his nature, against his nation, against his training, Gracielis strives to remake the bindings keeping Merafi safe.

This is not a typical fantasy novel, no matter the silly goffick cover art. The plot doesn't follow a single ordinary arc, but meanders through witty conversations and characters' internal ruminations, while in the background there is the rising tension and horror of Merafi's coming downfall. The magic surges into a deadly crescendo near the end, but for much of the book it is only hinted at. Sperring's magic is illusive and nightmarish, with rules that hold together but are never fully explained.

There's something of Guy Gavriel Kay to the characters, in the way they move through the Merafian court. Gracielis was my favorite--full of wasted potential, perpetually polite, secretly despairing. I really enjoyed the world building, as well--Merafi is like seventeenth/eighteenth century France, but without sexism (Thiercelin is the decorative lazy husband to the serious-minded, indispensable Yvelliane, who is First Councillor, a nice role reversal) or heterosexism (various characters have lovers of either gender, and no one thinks about it in the least). Sperring knows how her society works, down to the last detail.

The book takes a while to get going, but the leisurely pace of the beginning is necessary to give the reader time to assimilate all the tangled relationships between characters. I do think there were a few too many viewpoint characters: Joyain and Miraude each serve to expand the world a bit, but their plots could easily have been shifted to other characters. Seeing through the eyes of Thiercelin and Joyain and Miraude and Iareth and Yvelliane and Gracielis and even, at times, Kenan and Quenfrida was just too much. Plus occasional third person omniscient! Too many viewpoints. Joyain is, additionally, the one character who annoyed me. Even after repeated visitations by ghosts, nearly getting killed by supernatural mists that sliced at his flesh, seeing his friend be torn apart yet speak through ruined jaws, repeated warnings by other characters--he STILL declines to believe in magic, and indeed (view spoiler)

Trigger warning: (view spoiler)
