

Return to Eslinar

A. C. Wheeler

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This fable-like fantasy is a fun and accessible journey of self-discovery.

Return to Eslinar, by A. C. Wheeler, follows Sarah, an overworked photojournalist who finds herself in the magical realm of Eslinar, where she is hailed as the savior for the oppressed people. A tumultuous adventure ensues, pitting her against the Dark Lord and her own self-doubt in a fable-like fantasy tale.

Sarah finds herself at a metaphorical fork in the road. Her career has taken over her life, leaving little time for anything else. She decides to take time off to find herself. After falling asleep in the forest, a strange creature awakens her and kick-starts a magical journey. Sarah is believed to be a powerful being the people of Eslinar have awaited to save them from the clutches of the charming, but sinister, Dark Lord. In an interesting twist, most of the magic in Eslinar closely relates to self-esteem. Sarah doubts herself and allows events to dictate her actions, leaving her powerless to the machinations of the Dark Lord. When a child is abducted and lives hang in the balance, Sarah has to come to grips with her power or all may be lost.

Wheeler has crafted an interesting fantasy adventure in *Return to Eslinar*. While there are strange new worlds, magic, and fantastical creatures, the story is really more about self-discovery. Sarah is unhappy and overworked in the real world, but this new world isn't any easier. Her growth is intriguing to follow as she struggles with and adapts to her new circumstances. This lends the story the feeling of an allegorical fable, not a simple fantasy book.

However, some issues arise with this discrepancy. Sarah has no real goal or motivation for most of the book, not until the child she befriends is abducted by the Dark Lord. While it is interesting to follow her transformation, there is no tension to make it engaging. There are no high stakes or clear cut goals to see Sarah or other characters struggle to overcome. The last third of the book starts to achieve that with the abducted child; however, there is no reason to care if she is saved or not.

The writing is fairly decent with minor typos, but it is too light on details and descriptions. More information about the current scene in terms of character movements and environmental details would help the story feel more realized. Fixing this and adding clear goals and consequences for failure would beef the story up and make Sarah's journey more captivating. As it stands, the novel reads like an abbreviated story. If this is the first in a series, it could do more to establish the world. If this is a stand-alone, it does little to ensnare the imagination or provide characters to care about.

Return to Eslinar is an interesting variation on the fantasy genre. The primary focus is following Sarah and highlighting the vagaries of life, which never turn out as expected. This makes it a great read for lovers of fantasy, YA, or a fresh take on the standard magical good versus evil. A quick read with an important message, Sarah's journey of self-discovery through Eslinar is fun and accessible to all readers.

JOHN M. MURRAY (December 2, 2015)

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