



A Kingdom Far and Clear: The Complete Swan Lake Trilogy

Mark Helprin , Chris Van Allsburg (Illustrator)

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The most enduring tales of fantasy are appreciated by readers of all ages, generation after generation. This trilogy of novellas by critically acclaimed author Mark Helprin will stand that test by time. The heroes of his imagined kingdom pit the power of their love and devotion against dark forces of greed and suppression. His themes resonate for readers of contemporary fantasy as well as those who cherish classic legends and tales. This Calla Edition presents Helprin's novellas — *Swan Lake*, *A City in Winter*, and *The Veil of Snows* — in a single volume, as he had always intended. Award-winning illustrator Chris Van Allsburg's 42 full-color plates complement Helprin's prose with sensitively wrought, finely nuanced images — sometimes grand, sometimes fanciful, always evocative. This signed, numbered edition, limited to 300 copies, includes a deluxe slipcase.

A Kingdom Far and Clear: The Complete Swan Lake Trilogy Details

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Scott Noble says

Helprin never disappoints me. The only thing I didn't like about this book, and it's admittedly absurd, is that it was almost too pretty to read. I'm not talking about the prose her, Helprin's prose always borders on poetic. If it were dessert it would be chocolate mousse or cheesecake, so rich that you have to take your time devouring it. Instead, the actual binding, printing and artwork in this book makes it something that you don't really want to spill your actual dessert on. This is a problem since I sneak most of my reading in over a meal lately.

Nonetheless, I finished it and enjoyed every morsel of the three tales within. While the writing is no less a tapestry than Helprin's other books, this one might have a slightly larger target audience. Essentially, three fairy tales, the books are appropriate for anyone perhaps 11 or 12 years and up, while his other works seem more aptly focused on an older audience.

Fantastic read!

Denise says

I didn't finish this. I have no interest in finishing it. It's sat on my shelf all year. I forced myself to make it to the final third but finally gave up. It's intolerably silly. The artwork was pretty and the first third of the story was fairy tail like but it just gets more and more bizarre to the point it becomes painful to continue.

Leah says

Once upon a time...

When the old emperor dies, his young son is given over to the care of a trusted servant who is told to keep him safe from the Regent who will rule till the Prince comes of age. The Tutor outwardly shows loyalty to the cruel Regent but secretly ensures that the Prince is given all the necessary training to fight for his crown if need be when the time comes. But as the Prince becomes a man, he falls in love with a woman who will never be accepted as a suitable bride, and tragedy is certain to follow...

Three linked novellas, the book starts with a retelling of the story of Swan Lake, set into a fantasy kingdom sited primarily in and around the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. In this version, the Regent, soon to be known as the Usurper, murdered the parents of Odette while she was a baby, but her nurse carried her into hiding where she has been ever since, until the Prince meets her while out hunting. The first novella tells the tale of Odette and the Prince, while the second and third tell the story of their daughter, as she first tries to regain the crown from the Usurper and then defend the city against his forces.

"The bakeries are on our east wall. They are much bigger than the yam kitchens, of course. Well, naturally. And the chocolate kitchens are on the south wall. Though the chocolate kitchens have six thousand chefs and

workers and we have only three thousand, they are divided by law into three sections – beverages, candy and desserts.”

Helprin's prose is never less than flowing, often beautiful and occasionally overblown, with distinct shades of purple at points. The sadness and tragedy of the story is told against the backdrop of a fantasy world filled with inventiveness and imaginative humour, which serve to lift the reader out of the unremitting bleakness of the plot. There are satirical elements as Helprin takes sideswipes at various aspects of real world politics – the Usurper's kingdom bears some similarity to the totalitarian regimes of the mid-20th century. The role of the media as propagandists for the ruling regime is central to the story. Although wars take place over the course of the book, we don't see them – they happen offstage during the breaks between the novellas. Instead, Helprin concentrates on the personal stories of the three different narrators of each novella and of the young daughter of the Prince, as she grows up to lead the rebellion against the Usurper.

“I had no time to reflect as I planned the defense. We could only guess when the assault would come, but were sure the usurper was saving us for last. Then the capital would be besieged by terrified armies of slaves fighting as slaves for the principle of slavery, and all in the currency of fear.”

This is fundamentally a fairy story – it doesn't pay the reader to look too closely at the consistency of the politics or to wonder why the replacement of a totalitarian dictator by an absolute monarch is seen as a good thing by Helprin, himself a son of democratic America. There is an undercurrent of a religious theme but this is never fully developed and seemed to me to sit somewhat at odds with the overtly political and militaristic tone of the tale. And, as with many of the old fairy tales, there is no triumphant conclusion – I have seen many reviews saying the book contains an element of hope, but that wasn't my feeling at all. It seems to me the book is filled with bleakness and despair as two power-hungry factions battle for the kingdom regardless of the suffering and death of those they rule. If there is hope, it must be in the unquestioning loyalty and acts of heroism shown by some of the characters - mistaken loyalty, but perhaps still admirable.

“But I have not forgotten, for I believe in the unfolding of the tale, that, like water, it cannot be suppressed in its simple will to rise, if it is fed by rains and comes in abundance. The only thing that lasts is the unfolding of the tale, the only thing of which you can be sure.”

The book itself is beautifully produced with 42 full-page illustrations by Chris van Allsburg. The font is large and clear, the paper is thick enough to be almost card stock and each page has a decorative banner at the head. Physically it would make a beautiful gift for a child of about eight or nine up but, although the imaginative world and wonderful illustrations may appeal to someone of that age, I'm not sure that the bleakness of the story will, especially if they like their stories to end with a convincing '*and they all lived happily ever after*'. My own feeling is that the book is much more suited to an adult or 'young adult' audience.

I freely admit that fantasy is not one of my preferred genres and my struggles with what I saw as inconsistencies in the plot and 'message' of this book may not bother a reader who is more willing to give herself up to the different worldview that fantasy often demands. Overall, the quality of the prose and the inventiveness outweighed the weaknesses for me, and made this an enjoyable read, greatly enhanced by the illustrations and physical quality of the book. My 5 star rating is made up of 4 for the story plus an extra 1 for the book itself.

Keith says

A beautiful edition of all three of Mark Helprin's "Illustrated Tales" as he describes them on his website. I originally read the three tales in the individually published editions but this collection, which follows the author's original intention, is even more beautiful and charming to read as one story.

Jason Mills says

The first of the three 'books' in this volume, *Swan Lake*, follows a similar story to the ballet. A young prince is first enamoured of a woman (herself of noble blood and murdered parents) who lives by a remote lake; but he is for a time seduced away from this pure love by the woman's worldly counterpart at court. A usurper rises and overthrows the prince's father, the emperor, while the prince, reunited with his love - well, enough said. All this is told by an old tutor to a young girl in the mountains, and it is she, a lost princess, who goes on to retake the kingdom as narrator of the second book, *A City In Winter*. The cycle completes with the next generation in *The Veil Of Snows*.

Helprin's vivid prose is well suited to his operatic themes. He is winningly careless of anachronism in this unnamed land in an unknown time, and confident in his brushstrokes of humour:

...Beanslaw Tookisheim, the electricity magnate, who made his fortune by harnessing dynamos to house-size wheels in which ten thousand chipmunks fed on meal laced with anxiety drugs would desperately try to flee overhead horns blasting out *The 1812 Overture*.

Young readers may be delighted by these cheerful indulgences, as well as by the bold imagination that offers us: a palace so huge that even to cross its bakery takes six hours on something like a ski lift; a whale in a bathtub; a clock built by God. That said, I'm not entirely sure that I would have grasped this sprawling story of rebellion and nobility at the age of, say, ten. I felt somewhat that Helprin was writing in the *genre* of children's fiction, rather than writing a book for children. He is concerned, as also in his gut-twistingly funny novel *Freddy And Fredericka*, to promote a vision of honourable leadership and self-sacrificing duty, forged in a refiner's fire (qv), that is as laudable as it is improbable. I'm not clear if he believes in this, or chooses or aspires to believe it, or merely means to *confront* me with it; but it's a vision that is, at any rate, unignorable.

The prose and the tale, then, are fairly described as beautiful. What a pleasure therefore that they are presented in such a physically beautiful form. The paper is luxurious, the large Weiss print crisp as a shard of ice. Each page of this expansive hardback is topped with a decorative frieze. To hold it is to covet it! And then there are the illustrations, full-page colour plates by Chris Van Allsburg that in their muted yet rich tones contain just enough detail and no more: I would be delighted to hang any one of these on my wall.

In sum: a glorious book for 'children of all ages' (except, perhaps, actual children!).

James says

Think of this collection of three short novels as *_Winter's Tale_* written for bright, sensitive children. It's not a happy story, although it is often humorous and sometimes silly, but it will give the exceptionally perceptive young reader a great deal to work with, and work through. Were I the parent of such a child, I would co-read

the book with the child and spend the time necessary to help the child to understand and interpret its subtlety, nuance and parallels to our own time and place.

To be very clear, this collection, while a work for children, is beautifully written and can be enjoyed by all readers.

The Calla edition is a joy to read - printed on thick, high quality paper, beautifully illustrated and of a heft that must be felt to be appreciated.

Ali M. says

This was my introduction to Mark Helprin, and I must say, I am smitten. His prose is so rich, pristine, and perceptive; at times, it felt like a moral imperative to set the book down, just to let the effect of a certain sentence or passage sink in. Chris Van Allsburg (best known for illustrating *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*) provides some of his gorgeous artwork to accompany the tale. All in all, this is one of the prettier books I own – in more than one sense of the word.

A Kingdom Far and Clear is in fact three novellas published as one volume. The first is Helprin's take on Tchaikovsky's famous Swan Lake ballet, and the second two expand on that story, turning it into a generational fable with varying amounts of success. I loved the first and second books best; a ten-year-old orphan queen in exile, infiltrating the corrupt rule of her kingdom on her own, and leading armies to reclaim it? Awesome. Sadly, for reasons not entirely justified, her character changes in the third book – I think because Helprin was trying to make a point about the invincible perspective of a child, and how age can invite paralyzing fears into our lives – but it doesn't sit quite right. And the final scene would have been a whole lot sweeter if (view spoiler). But I did so love the melancholy of the last act, and how the finale does not (implied: cannot) occur until a key character finally loses faith, and has nothing left to believe in. Then, against all odds, the end he's been waiting for comes.

A lovely, haunting read with much to say about the systems of power that trap us, as well as the convictions and ideals that sustain us. I'm now excited to dive into more Helprin – Winter's Tale, you're up next!

Nick says

Armed with a gift certificate to the greatest bookstore I know, I browsed the shelves with a light heart, eager to take a risk to purchase something both worthwhile and unknown. A difficult task. The Swan Lake Trilogy beckoned to me in the children's books section (on sale, and it's always a good place for gifts for my godchildren). I picked it up because I'd read the author's name somewhere briefly and was intrigued, though I would've had little to say if anyone had asked me who he was or what he wrote. The heft of the book, its creamy textured pages and startlingly luminous illustrations demanded further investigation. I opened at random and came across this passage:

"He had no desire to kill animals. This was owing not so much to compassion as to respect, for not even memory can conspire to make a smoother line than the track of a bird wheeling silently in the sunshine over blue water. And when deer step gingerly in the heather, their precision of motion is art, and that is not to mention the perfect rocketry of their escapes. Were they to go faster, the result would not be so pleasing, and were they to go slower, they would not appear to be nobly disciplining themselves against flight" (p. 49).

My first reaction, after the initial exhilaration over such verbiage, was that Helprin pays very close attention to things. I was hooked.

I made my way through the book over the course of a month or so, reading before bed. The initial sense that this was not a book for children, or even for adolescents, was confirmed throughout my reading, and I would be hard pressed to argue what its intended audience might be. I suspect that, in the words of CS Lewis, Helprin found that the medium of a fairy tale best suited the tone of whatever it was he saw in his mind's eye, regardless of whether his readers were children. That the vocabulary and tone can at times overwhelm the narrative is a defect only in the sense that it causes Helprin to strike a discordant note here and there, like an exuberant prodigy improvising on the piano.

The trilogy follows the career of a girl banished from her royal inheritance by the intrigues of a usurper, in the first person and then through the perspective of those who accompany her. I found the plot to be tight, with few wasted excursions into descriptive whimsy (though it is here that his prose can be most delightful). He builds to climaxes that are surprising without being arbitrary in their unexpectedness, and knows when a chapter is over.

Van Allsburg's illustrations are full of grandeur and depth, capturing both climactic and simple moments with a remarkable eye for twilight. Before reading the book itself, I took a couple young boys age 3 and 6 through the plates, and both were captivated by the dozens of scenes lifted from the story. We guessed at what they could mean, and found ample material for imaginative prequels in the bright color and elegant forms they portrayed.

A great book? A classic? No. But a delightful find on a winter's day in Wichita, unanticipated and simple? Most definitely!

Ethan says

I'd like to start off by saying that from a technical standpoint, this is a very well written book. The language is poetic and painstakingly chosen to create excellently crafted sentences. That's where my praise of the book ends. I suppose part of my dislike of this trilogy is that I expected something totally different. What made me buy the book was the fact that it claimed to be a novelization of Swan Lake. As it turns out, only the first third of the book (the first novel in the trilogy) is about Swan Lake. The other two thirds are a continuation of the story that (as far as I can tell) are original to the author.

What I found most unfortunate was that the author had stripped the story of all of the magical elements that make the original ballet/fairy tale so enchanting. He dismisses the transformation of the swan maidens as a legend that sprang up around the disappearance of a royal baby. The book is really just one long socio-political satire, which is odd since it is marketed toward children. The story is very heavy on moralizing and I found the last third to be considerably preachy. Overall, I found myself feeling very possessive of the Swan Lake story and felt like it had received some bad plastic surgery in this retelling.

That said, if you enjoy this author and want to share this trilogy with children, I would definitely suggest reading it out loud to anyone under the age of thirteen. Mr. Helprin does not water down his style, vocabulary, or content for a young audience, and there will most likely be a lot of discussion. If you have a young adult reader in your home who loved the original Swan Lake as a kid and is now beginning to acquire a taste for political novels, this might be to their tastes.

Anna says

A Kingdom Far And Clear collects Mark Helprin's fairy tale trilogy in one volume, along with Chris Van Allsburg's original illustrations. A truly beautiful book in both writing and pictures. It is a grand, epic sort of tale, with themes that will be familiar to readers of Helprin's novels: justice, truth, beauty, love, and the triumph of good over evil.

The vocabulary here would likely be a challenge for some young readers, but it could be enjoyable to read it aloud to that age group.

Jenny's says

Years ago, when my children were still young enough to appreciate time spent reading with mom, this was one of our favorites. The artwork is done by Chris Van Allsburg. It is so masterful, so beautiful that the images float around in your head long after a reading of the trilogy. This particular volume puts all three stories together in one. I stumbled across it at the local book store and fell in love all over again. I sat down and read it from the cover to delicious end. Mark Helprin wrote this beautiful story. I was reminded again why I loved this story and why I loved his story *Winter's Tale*, which is being released in movie form this month. If you're looking for something special for your children or grandchildren consider this. It's a beautiful book to read and collect for a lifetime. And maybe you'll find as I did, that you really read it for yourself, because we all need something beautiful in life, to enjoy whenever we can.

Rebecca says

The plates of images are lovely and add so much to the stories. This is a classic book, updated for today's reader.

Amber says

This is a trilogy of really excellent old-fashioned stories. It has all the ideals of magic found in the more serious fairy tales, but has a more adult flavor to it. Hard to explain. The pictures by Chris Van Allsburg are gorgeous, of course, but I couldn't help wishing for more of them. I particularly wanted to explore the palace much more thoroughly, both by word and picture. Not completely, because the best rooms are those your imagination populates, but MORE! Helprin's writing is magical, but sometimes it feels like part of a scene is skipped for a few seconds. It's weird, because even if I go back over the previous paragraph again, the connecting information is gone. So bizarre. The story was a good one, though, and one that I'll return to and share again.

Ben McFarland says

I have no idea why this children's book trilogy is so hard to find. At its heart, it is a fairy tale (I seem to read a lot of those come to think of it) about chivalry, honor, and hope. Helprin writes in his typical fanciful style,

which is somehow opinionated, dense, and fun at the same time, with countless parallels to Winter's Tale. Illustrations are by the same artist who drew Jumanji and The Polar Express.

The three books collected in A Kingdom Far and Clear are different in tone and narrative viewpoint but also tell a single story effectively, with more ups and downs than the typical fairy tale. The second one is my favorite because of a moment when science and faith come together absurdly and beautifully like the sun and the moon in an eclipse. Let's just say it has to do with a blatant violation of the laws of thermodynamics, and the fact that I'm even mentioning this about a children's book shows you what a brilliant book it is. All I know is, because nobody seems to know about this book, I have a ready-made gift for children whose parents will read to them, because this book is an incredible find.

Rebecca Yager says

Gorgeously written and infinitely sad but always with a gleam of hope and triumph glimmering through the never ending snows.

[Warning: a few unspecific spoilers below]

I did struggle with whether or not to give this 4 or 5 stars. I settled on 5 because in spite of what I view as a few pretty big problems, the story and the writing are both haunting me.

The writing is stunningly beautiful, but the story itself was not at all what I expected. In the vein of George RR Martin, no character is safe. And while the books are not slow moving, the audience is robbed of experiencing most of the essential action. Many vital characters perish "offstage" and all of the epic battles occur unseen, either in between the books or in another city, and the audience is simply informed that they happened.

I anticipated more magic since the traditional story of Swan Lake is brimming with curses and spells and transformation, but Helprin's retelling makes it much more realistic. Although it is a fantasy, the magic is subtle, vague, and unexplained.

The greatest weakness I think is undoubtedly the ending. You're carried through three generations of utter tragedy only to be abandoned at the end with a fairly certain but unexplained triumph in sight where a former enemy "marched down the mountainsides in a host larger than I had ever imagined, having switched allegiances, and come to our side, or so I prayed. And, yes, it was so." From a writing perspective, this is not only weak but an inexcusable use of deus ex machina to have a force only previously alluded to suddenly coming to save the kingdom. I don't understand why the supremely talented Mr. Helprin would choose that kind of ending when he is obviously capable of crafting something extraordinary. Read through a spiritual lens, it could be interpreted that we are constantly doomed to fail but one day the rightful King will return and save us all. I don't know how deeply Mr. Helprin intended us to look and have no idea of his personal worldview.

But either way, in the end of the story told in this trilogy, none of our beloved characters see victory and we never see the despicable villain defeated, but we're pretty sure that this time the good guys are going to win. I like tragic endings and I like happy endings, but I must confess the muddy waters that come of being deprived of both are a little irritating. I'm hoping when I read it a second time, the ending will feel more satisfactory.

All of that said, this is an exquisitely written book filled with beauty, yearning, sacrifice, epic sadness, exquisite tragedy, and the haunting hope of triumph. A must-read for all passionate fairy tale readers and anyone addicted to the magic of beautiful words.
