



# Mélusine

*Sarah Monette*

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*Mélusine — a city of secrets and lies, pleasure and pain, magic and corruption — and destinies lost and found.*

Felix Harrowgate is a dashing, highly respected wizard. But his aristocratic peers don't know his dark past — how his abusive former master enslaved him, body and soul, and trained him to pass as a nobleman. Within the walls of the Mirador — Melusine's citadel of power and wizardry — Felix believed he was safe. He was wrong. Now, the horrors of his previous life have found him and threaten to destroy all he has since become.

Mildmay the Fox is used to being hunted. Raised as a kept-thief and trained as an assassin, he escaped his Keeper long ago and lives on his own as a cat burglar. But now he has been caught by a mysterious foreign wizard using a powerful calling charm. And yet the wizard was looking not for Mildmay — but for Felix Harrowgate." Thrown together by fate, the broken wizard Felix and the wanted killer Mildmay journey far from Melusine through lands thick with strange magics and terrible demons of darkness. But it is the shocking secret from their pasts, linking them inexorably together, that will either save them, or destroy them.

## Mélusine Details

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# From Reader Review *Mélusine* for online ebook

## First Second Books says

I'm finding this book especially interesting because the main character gets driven insane in the first quarter – and then remains one of the narrators for the rest of the book. But even though he's insane, he's still understandable – it's like reading the world at a slant. I find it fascinating when you can get that across through writing style and description.

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## Valerie says

I picked this book up on a recommendation from one of my favorite authors - Charlaine Harris - and I wasn't disappointed. Sarah Monette does a marvelous job pulling us into this new world. For instance, if the names she gives to months sound oddly familiar, it's because they are borrowed from the French Revolution's republican calendar system. This deft touch, in addition to many other captivating details, creates an alternate universe with a historical past that is both familiar and exotic. Half the enjoyment of the novel is learning the systems and ideologies that control and inform this world.

Better still are the two perspectives of city of Melusine - the view from the top is provided by Felix Harrowgate, a wizard in the upper echelons of the Mirador (the center of power in Melusine). The view from the mean streets is provided by Mildmay the Fox, a former "kept thief" trying to get by in the Lower City. I enjoyed learning about the city through the two protagonist's distinct voices, as they are propelled toward each other through a series of events that will keep you reading long after you should have put the light out and gone to sleep.

Within this richly envisioned setting, Monette crafts an original and engaging story of power, betrayal, and unexpected loyalty. I'm reluctant to reveal any plot points (and there is at least one review on this site that gives far too much away), however, I can tell you that there are vicious power struggles in the Mirador, strange and violent rituals in the grave yard, and insidious behavior in the asylum -- enough intrigue and action that kept me reading when I really should have been doing laundry.

And though Monette is clearly leaving room for her sequel here, she does resolve enough plot lines to satisfy me.

Highlights: Mildmay's colorful use of the Marathine language, and the way in which Monette vividly depicts madness as experienced from the inside.

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## Sarah says

I struggled with this one some. I liked the two characters, and I particularly liked the way the author used Felix's POV once he was insane, but holy crap it needed a plot. Where were they going? What were they doing? How were they going to meet each other? Was the book description EVER going to happen? There were things that were happening along the way and each time we got a little more insight into the characters but there just didn't seem to be any point to the story. Ironically, about 250 pages in, one of the characters

echoed my thoughts (He read my mind! He's *fictional* , Sarah) and then finally finally finally Things Started Happening.

Overall it was an interesting story and I am glad I stuck it out those pages. I wouldn't recommend this to someone because I was quite exasperated at times. However, for people who really love character oriented stories and don't care if there's a point, this is a great novel for that. Both characters, Felix and Mildmay, are interesting characters and I really liked them. I won't be reading the other three books though.

As a warning, there's a violent gay rape in this that is difficult to stomach. Use caution.

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## **Xing says**

Rating: 3.5 stars

Melusine is a very difficult book to review, especially for a M/M book blog. As a high fantasy adventure, I would say this book is top-notch. As a M/M romance, I would give it a two thumbs...down. But regardless of how one would tag this story, my recommendation is this: patience.

Taking place in a fantasy world, the book follows two different characters in their own respective and separate yet slowly intertwining, plots. Felix is a powerful wizard of Melusine, with a past that he had escaped for the past six years. It's an unfortunate set of circumstances that lead to Felix being accused of an act that has shattered the foundation of Melusine, and sent him spiraling into an abyss of madness. He is living in a world of delusions, ghosts, and colors.

On the other hand, you have Mildmay – thief and assassin of Melusine. To be honest, Mildmay's story is difficult to vaguely summarize, as much of it would be spoilerish. Let's just say that much of his story is just him living his normal life as a cat burglar with events that barely touches path with Felix. Of the two main characters, Mildmay was definitely my favorite. He's blunt, down-to-earth, and has a sense of humor, while Felix's personality is hard to hone down due to his mental affliction.

When I say you follow these two characters in their separate story lines, I really do mean SEPARATE. Because these characters don't actually meet until 60% into the book. So patience being a virtue here is definitely important. Did I get grumpy towards 50%? Hell yeah. I wanted to scream at the book when these characters were so close to meeting, but last second circumstances drive them apart. It was definitely a point of annoyance for me. At the same time, this compelled me to read even more for their eventual meeting. Perhaps that was the author's intention?

Melusine is definitely high fantasy in the best way: great world building laced with its own languages, idioms, culture and laws. None of it is explained (I believe there is a word glossary in the beginning, but it isn't complete). You experience the world through the familiarity of Mildmay's adventures through the city and Felix's madness laced point of view. While it's confusing as hell in the beginning, it's still the best way to experience such a vast world of wizards, ghouls, ghosts, spirits, blood magic and necromancy.

In terms of the plot, I would say that Melusine is just the beginning of something much bigger. Unfortunately, this book seemed more like the setup for things to come and the pacing suffered for it. Does that mean it was boring? Some of the time, sure. But the book picks up the pace just when I feel like nodding off at times.

If you are looking for a M/M romance, look the other way. This whole paragraph may be considered a spoiler, so I would skip it if you want to avoid it. Still here? Okay then. Sure, Felix is a homosexual character, but there is absolutely no romance in this book. Not between the two main characters, and none with the others as well. In fact Mildmay is completely heterosexual. I wouldn't have minded so much if this book wasn't tagged as "M/M Romance" on Goodreads. But when a book is tagged with "romance," I kind of expect such a thing. So this is pretty much a M/M book without the romance (which to me just felt like another high fantasy book).

Regardless of such, the relationship between the two main characters was actually endearing. Unfortunately, we only see just the beginning of this as the book ends not too long after.

My only other big complaint of this book was the horrible proofing. I don't really know how to describe it, since it felt more like an ebook publishing error than anything else. It felt like someone took the paperback/hardback pages of the book, scanned it to a computer, then used a cheap OCR program to make it into an ebook, then failed to make sure that the recognition software was accurate. What resulted are sentences missing their period, random capitalization of words in the middle of a sentence, zeros instead of o's (e.g. "Open the door"), and some sentences that just didn't make sense at all. It got really bad towards the middle of the book, and less frequent towards the end. It really pissed me off, since the writing itself was superb, but the formatting issues kind of killed it.

Regardless of the major issues I had with *Mélusine*, I still really enjoyed it for what I came to realize was a great high-fantasy story of two people who were destined to meet. If you have the patience for it, *Mélusine* is really a gem. But as a M/M romance reader, I would tell you to look elsewhere.

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## Margaret says

*Mélusine* is a fabulous debut fantasy novel, about a pair of unlikely heroes in a richly imagined world. Felix Harrowgate is a wizard of the Mirador, powerful and respected until a long-held secret is divulged which drives him back to his evil master, Malkar, and into insanity. Meanwhile, the thief Mildmay the Fox is drawn into intrigue when he meets Ginevra, a beautiful shopgirl who wants him to steal back some items from her former lover. Eventually, the separate stories of Felix and Mildmay combine into one, as they form an unlikely partnership.

The real triumph of *Mélusine* is in its language and voice. Monette tells the story in three separate voices -- Felix's haughty sanity, Felix's insane delirium, and Mildmay's slangy thieves' cant -- and she handles them brilliantly, never losing her grasp for an instant or letting the reader be confused about who's narrating. Along with the narrative voices, the language is simply lush and vivid, utterly suitable to the richness of the setting; the city of *Mélusine* is particularly well described in Mildmay's sections of the narrative.

As far as the characters go, I preferred Mildmay's narrative to some extent, as he's the more immediately sympathetic character, with unsuspected depths of feeling. Felix falls into madness so quickly that it was a little difficult for me truly to empathize with the change in his circumstances, as there had been so little time to get to know him before his fall. Still, the vivid, present-tense passages where he's delirious and mad are emotionally compelling, simply for the horror of what he endures.

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## Em says

What a fantastic book! It took me at least a couple of hundred pages to get into the story and start to care for Felix and Mildmay, but then all of a sudden I couldn't put it down and desperately wanted things to get easier for the both of them. I've just started book 2, The Virtu, and also bought the other 2 books in the series, I can't wait to get stuck in!

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## Ashley says

While reading this book, I started to think of it as a whimsical runner in a marathon. Sometimes it jogged, sometimes it sprinted, sometimes it stopped to chase butterflies in the field, but surprisingly, it never fell on its face, and when it frolicked gaily (fear my puniness) across the finish line, it still managed to look fabulous, so it gets four stars.

Metaphors aside, I know this book is part of a four-book series, but I agree with others reviewers on this site in that it felt like a lot of build-up and then a lot of stuff...not happening. I was pretty happy with the build-up and progression we had in terms of the two main characters, but while reading, it was easy to stop and wonder what happened to the plot in the rest of the world. Even books that start off series or trilogies have to have some sense of finality at the end, and this novel didn't have quite enough. Still, I have to take into account the personalities of the two characters Monette tells the story through, and it makes sense that not as much attention was paid to the other story elements.

In conclusion, the book kind of felt like 500 pages worth of set-up, but it was good set-up with good characters (I completely adore Mildmay, and I didn't mind Felix as much as I thought I would even if he was a giant asshat at times) and great writing, so in the end, I enjoyed this novel and am looking forward to the rest of the series.

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## Alexa says

There was a certain amount of clumsiness here. It took way too long to begin to care about what was happening to the protagonists, and way too long to develop the plot, there was way too much name dropping of irrelevant characters from ancient history, and way too many dropped characters and story-lines; but in the end it did manage to pull itself together into a book I wanted to keep reading (although from an agonizingly slow beginning the ending was almost rushed!). Yet now she finally got my attention I do indeed want to know what happens next.

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## \_inbetween\_ says

This review seems full of nothing but criticism, so I'll frame it by saying that I didn't hate it, I actually enjoyed it, though you might not figure out why. Monette's involvement in recent blog affairs, plus her online present and most peeps in my environs feeling they have to read this book, made me hesitant to list it

at all.

Lots of the genre-usual invented names right from the start, perhaps not overly much compared to other fantasy books, but still more than I think necessary, ever. The split pov is always labled, which makes it feel like meant for sluggish minds. Felix is a fucking woman - if it weren't indicated that he had paid to beat up and rape child prostitutes, he'd obviously be 100 % cliché female, with the scandal from having once been a whore (in a bi society, what's the fucking big deal?) - and what with his subjecting himself to his old master again, orgasming in unwanted sex, wibbling and being caught before escaping and scorn from those he pushes away to protect them from his evil master. All of that is worst heroine crap. Similarly the story is, like all fantasy I might say, is basically historical fiction written by someone not PhDed enough to pull a Dunnett, therefor saying it's fantasy to get away with it - everyone does it, and most much less well! But with the pocket watches and wall safes and modern language, the costumes really seem nothing but cosplay, or the whole thing a boring steam punk setting. The Virtu itself is the grail. I wished the author would stop throwing all those Middle Earth names about. Often, I wish fantasy would be forbidden and people had to deal with real history. \*g\*

While it sounds like the worst of both worlds, it's still a good read and much preferable to Deanna Raybourne et al who claim to write proper historicals but also just transplant to get the "pretty costumes" and sexual mores she can then pretend to overthrow (gah, that whore outrage, so annoying).

At one point big bad Malkar says Felix is "as stable as aspic", and that is the truest description ever to me - he's just a wibbling weak nothing, and to have him be called "the deadliest wit of the court" a few lines later makes that all the more unbelievable. While Mildmay the Fox is described in action and capable, Felix keeps wibbling about being raped or made a catamite which makes NO SENSE AT ALL considering he also tells us he's used to it and good at dealing with it, except to make him into the aforementioned woman, but since he *isn't*, I'm blissfully uncaring, I can actually enjoy the drama! It has come to this, huh. Go on, ohsotall ohsopretty crying man, make my day (no, seriously, huh).

Mildmay keeps daring-doing, interacting and rescuing, even has an appealing lady friend, while Felix keeps being stoned and tortured endlessly, until I have to say it was simply a very bad choice to interweave them so rigidly, the 120 little repetitive paragraphs of whatfreshhorror achieving the opposite to intended effect. Felix should have been SHOWN to be dangerous and beautiful and witty, the torturing then compressed, so there would have been more weight, and an equal weight to Mildmay, rather than me despising Felix - for different reasons, but just like his tormentors.

I kept not-hating it, though, I'd even say it's enjoyable, and that the annoyance of plonking some odd names into an ahistorical historical novel to make it "fantasy" is the same for most of the genre and that I'm glad there's no magic here, no matter what the blurb says. But that still leaves Felix who KEEPS FAINTING. Every bloody little segment ends with "the darkness swallowed me". Apart from the start and hints of his past - men who are ashamed of scars, both of them? in such a traditional society that whoring is frowned upon? I don't buy it! - he really is mostly just shoved around, so I feel less and less and less while we are meant to see him descend, when they don't even break or pull or do anything that humans did to each other for millenia.

While Mildmay keeps having adventures in the Dickensian setting, his Ginevra is suddenly just a gossip girl bitch instead of the interesting woman he fell for, so by the time their relationship ends one feels nothing, and his grief - doesn't work (even less in following books where it's still harped on). Also the book is nearly half done and the two (male) leads have never met, and while the pathetic Felix is seven feet tall we don't know much about Mildmay's looks objectively.

Felix then cries a lot and is actually *sent to his bedroom* (I am not making this up) while Millyfox has an obsession of having toenails pulled. Joking aside, at around page 300 of those 400+, they finally meet.

AND THEY SEEM TO BE BROTHERS?! For a few hours of not reading I calmly thought that they'll be revealed just to be cousins, bad cliché since Troy but still ... and then SUDDENLY I WONDERED IF I WAS SO MISLED AND THEY WEREN'T AND WOULD NEVER BE A COUPLE. And I asked a friend and she googled that "one of the heroes is gay" ... one? If this means ... I just can't ... Felix was the wussiest sissiest whimpiest dishrag imaginable and if she made him male just to not be accused of being sexist and writing the women so awfully while Mildmay is a fun antihero ... I can't believe I did this to myself, hoping that fandom antipathy would lead me to enjoyment. I daren't spoiler myself now, it still might be ... ohgahdifeelsicknow.

This would require listing and quoting, but note that the book is still set in PRE-INDUSTRIAL times, and COMPLETE UN-SENSUAL. Don't believe the blurb. :)

I already mentioned that the magic is pastede\_on and that I don't care, I can do without it. To me it's obvious that it's not "decadent" magic at all (rape-sex-magic is probably the worst handled element of the author, see the atrocious Wolves book) but rather the perfect excuse to write a historical without in-depth knowledge or research. I prefer that infinitely to books where magic can solve most problems, though it seems nothing but a ploy to get fantasy readers. But the lack of description goes very bad when I think we are in wide open country and we are in fact in towns, with street lamps, and walls! That smacked me right out of it twice. I had thought the lack of description was due to the pov and them being used to whatever was around, but considering the repetitive omgdaaaarkness omganimalheads sights of Felix, maybe Monette really is much worse than I think.

At least once the two men meet, they are finally VISIBLE. I had not known for 3/4 of the book that Felix was older or that Mildmay was smaller than average. While Felix "illness" makes more sense from the outside, his supposed cutting tongue when sane is still only mentioned, not even shown now that Mildmay supposedly meets it for the first time. With 100 pages to go and I'm hoping against hope they will have sex and not be brothers. Otherwise I need psychoanalysis about why I refuse to hate this book (when I hate everything about the hero).

The story finally picked up then, even though it frustratingly kept to the pattern of the same thing repeated over and over when Mildmay was in hospital, not getting better (how many times can you get worse while staying the same?), and the various "magical cures" on Felix were as obscure ie. never shown or explained, as his curse. Both the prostitution and the rape was meant to be a huge reveal - what an anti-climax! I had hoped for 500 pages to find out something new about him or them, and then Felix just tells Mildmay what we all knew from chapter one on. But they cared about and finally for each other, and even though I had finally cracked and jumped ahead to when finally the sane Felix would come to Mildmay, I then got up in the middle of the night to read the last chapters properly. As I'll repeat over the next books, it all depends on the final outcome of the series if I've just been cheaply had or read small signs correctly.

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## Juxian says

This book was a beautiful, unexpected love. I have bumpy relationship with fantasy. Some of my all-time favorite books are fantasy, but at the same time I DNF'd more fantasy books than probably in any other

genre. And I don't want to say that ah ha, 'Melusine' was a better book than all those I tossed away. It's just that it was a book that clicked with me. In every possible way. I saw in some other reviews the things that didn't work for people, and I understand it, but I think they were exactly the ones I loved most.

I loved the way Sarah Monette fountains with names, places, dates and historical events, the way you can make sense out of some of them from context or by analogy, and some don't come to mean anything, at least for now, but you still can enjoy the sound of them. I loved the frequent change of p.o.v. (okay, with me being "oh look, shiny!" I prefer a story to be told in shorter installments rather than in too long ones). Besides, since for a long time two main characters don't meet and are not in the same scenes, we don't have any redundant descriptions like "A looked at B and thought" - change of p.o.v. - "B looked at A and thought".

We have two parallel stories where some scenes perfectly counterpoint each other.

I don't think this book is a fantasy m/m romance, though. It is rather fantasy where one character is gay (or more, maybe). I don't know if it becomes m/m romance later - and I don't want to know. I'm okay either way :) I'm okay with everything there is in this book - and looking forward to finding out what happens next (yeah, I know I will remember these words when I hate something that happens in the next books, and I can bet I will - but now I'm so much in love :))

Oh Felix. Oh Mildmay. I love both of them with all my heart. It was Mildmay's voice that captured my attention as soon as I started reading, and the more I learned about him, the more I liked him. And Felix - okay, at times Felix was not easy to like. But - with all that suffering that heaped, and heaped, and heaped on him - and you know my love for traumatized characters - there was no way I wouldn't fall in love with him. And God, did he suffer! This book really should be on top in the "tortured hero" list on Listopia - is it? And then there were moments when Felix didn't suffer - and wasn't a prick - like when (view spoiler) - and these moments, even though rare, were especially beautiful.

I enjoyed their separate stories before their meeting, both of them were equally fascinating. But after they met - the book, like, exploded for me. In a good way. That chemistry! And it is not any less because is not romantic chemistry (view spoiler). Together Felix and Mildmay are awesome in every interaction of theirs. (view spoiler)

I'm a bit nervous about starting the next book, because I loved this one so much there is only one way from the top - but of course I can't stay away from it :)

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## **M'rella says**

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Tho I like it when authors dump you right in the middle of things and you have to start running the moment you hit the ground, this was not the case. I

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## **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

I haven't been reading nearly as much Fantasy as I used to (there was a time when it was ALL I'd read, excluding books for school or uni), but I have quite a few (understatement) on my shelves, unread. This one was recommended by a friend who had several sleepless nights in a row while she tore through all four books. Hard to ignore a rec like that! I know people have complaints about this book, but I felt like my faith in Fantasy was rekindled after reading this.

In the city of Mélusine, in Marathat, is the Mirador. (It's clearly a city that likes M words.) The Mirador is the home of the Cabal: the Cabaline wizards; and the Lord Protector, who is annemer - non-magical. Outside

the Mirador, in the Lower City, are the thieves and prostitutes, the poor and destitute. But inside the Mirador, all is sparkling and clean and lush splendour.

Felix Harrowgate is a wizard - "hocus", as the common people call them - of the Mirador. Having broken the magical bonds to his master, Malkar (a foreign wizard), Felix is at the prime of his life: the most powerful wizard in the Cabal; in a relationship with the Lord Protector's brother and heir, Shannon; popular and feared and loving it. Until the day his position - his very existence as a trusted Cabal wizard - is torn to shreds when a fellow wizard, Lord Robert, reveals Felix's secret: that before coming to the Mirador, masquerading as a wizard of noble lineage, Felix was nothing but a prostitute in Pharaohlight, a district known for the sadistic pleasures the rich can have with young boys.

In his spiralling despair and fear and depression, Felix turns as if out of habit to his old master, the man who had bought him at fourteen from out of a whorehouse in Pharaohlight, taken him to another city to train him and make of him a lifelong slave before bringing him back to Mélusine. Malkar has his own agenda, and Felix is instrumental to it. After letting Felix drug his sorrows, Malkar uses him in the worst way possible in a ritual that enables him to use Felix's magic to break the Virtu - the stone that the wizards swear to, that holds all the spells in the Mirador in place, that protects them all.

Felix's mind shatters alongside the Virtu. Under Malkar's compulsion, he cannot speak the truth and is accused of the greatest treachery and betrayal. He starts going mad. Even when the compulsion is broken, his sanity eludes him. Reduced to the lowliest beggar amongst his previous compatriots, Felix is dragged around by the wizards in their attempt to repair the Virtu.

In the Lower City, a thief and assassin, Mildmay the Fox, scrapes together a living as a cat burglar. His latest assignment brings him into contact with a young woman, Genevra, who needs him to steal back her jewellery and then help her sell a priceless necklace to much-feared necromancer. After the Virtu is broken, the Mirador goes scape-goating, rounding up and executing small-time magic hustlers and healers in the Lower City. Betrayed by his own fellow thieves, Mildmay is soon on the run, only to unwittingly respond to a summoning spell that brings him into the service of a foreign wizard and fortune-teller, Mavortian. All of Mavortian's skills at reading the future tell him that he needs Felix Harrowgate, and Mildmay is the key to getting him.

I'm a big fan of less traditional, formulaic Fantasy. While it's hard to escape the Quest formula entirely, *Mélusine* comes close. About half the novel takes place in the city itself, and deals with Felix's time locked up in the mental asylum and Mildmay's relationship with Genevra - I love this. Spending time with the characters actually *living* as opposed to chasing off after something. As Frodo proved, a Quest can take over your life. You're a different person while on a Quest. And a Quest narrative can become too focused on plot - the characters are empty shells once all the fuss has died down and they've "won". The parts of Harry Potter, for example, that I've always adored are the parts where nothing action-packed is happening: they're studying, they're having little dramas and going hormonal, they're dealing with family, they're exploring the school etc.

Since you're thrown into *Mélusine* without a paddle from the opening line, spending several months exploring the city and the society is helpful in piecing it all together. There's nothing particularly original or "alien" about the culture, but the characters do talk with an assumption you already know what they're on about, so there is some clue-gathering in that regard. I enjoy it. I don't like it when authors dumb-down their worlds and explain every little thing like the characters are conscious of our presence. (I'm reading a book right now that does that constantly, and it's getting old fast.)

*Mélusine* is a pleasant mix of traditional Fantasy and a more mature, modern ability to tackle the dark side of human nature. If I mention Kushiel's Dart, A Game of Thrones, Wizard's First Rule and the Black Jewels trilogy, among other, they all share this dark, mature approach that I don't have a good word for. Something violent, anyway. I'll even throw Outlander in there too, to shift the focus from Fantasy a bit. The thievery and boy-love reminded me a bit of Lynn Flewelling's Nightrunner books, and even Brent Weeks' The Way of Shadows, which is a weaker story, prose-wise. So no, it's not *original* or unique, regardless of which book came first, but I won't ever have trouble confusing it with anything else.

Told from the first-person perspectives of both Felix and Mildmay, who alternate fairly frequently, they both have very distinct voices which could easily become cheesy but thankfully manages to keep its head above water (the stylistic device, that is). When Felix sinks into madness, his voice changes yet again and he slips into present tense to highlight his mental state: lost, confused, afraid, delusional. He starts seeing colours around people that reflect how they're feeling, and sees them with as monsters, with the heads of animals or as corpses or statues - whatever reflects their nature. When Felix and Mildmay are brought together, you then get the two different perspectives on the same scene. In terms of Monette's handle of her craft, her ability to create two very distinct, very alive characters, she's excellent. I would like her proof-reader to learn the difference between lie, lay and laid (in their various tenses), because it was never once used correctly and this kind of thing is very distracting.

Structurally, the story comes together neatly with backstory revealed along the way. For much of the book, it's not clear where the story is going and it's the characters who drive you on and make it hard to put the book down. Later, there is a Quest journey to bring back Felix's sanity, and for people who like a Fantasy book to be a complete story in and of itself, you'll be pleased to know this has that. No cliffhangers here.

There are plenty of unanswered questions though, and the bigger over-arching plot that's still to be resolved. A few details I didn't understand. I don't get what the wizards actually *do*, especially as they're not allowed to use their powers to help anyone. Why is healing forbidden? Especially when they seem free to do nasty things to each other. I also couldn't follow the colloquial way of telling the time and passage of years, which uses different words. I could have used a glossary, to be honest. But they're small quibbles amongst the things I liked.

I especially liked that neither Mildmay nor Felix are completely sympathetic or necessarily likeable characters - deeply flawed the both of them, they nevertheless have enough charisma to make you pay attention, and enough of a sob-story past to make you care. At times I did feel the story, especially Felix's half, got too self-indulgent, and I can understand if readers lose patience with Felix. He's a prick as a wizard with all his mental faculties intact, but he's also easier to tolerate. And he does have his moments of being decent. I don't altogether trust him, though. Mildmay is much more straight-forward, and I love his expression, the one he uses when he's really frustrated and exasperated and has lost patience: "Well fuck me sideways till I cry" which pops into my head every time I feel the same way, now. Yep, it's a winner. So glad I came across book two, *The Virtu* in a second-hand book shop a few months ago and bought it even though I hadn't read this one at the time. There are times for following your gut, yes? Indeed.

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## Ben Babcock says

*Mélusine* suffers from two narrators: Felix Harrowgate and Mildmay the Fox. I say "suffers" because Monette switches between the two perspectives more frequently than Bill Nye drops mad science truth. Each chapter is about thirty or fifty pages in this paperback edition, but perspective can happen as often as once

every page. Sometimes the characters barely get a few paragraphs in before Monette switches to the other narrator. Consequently, instead of feeling like I'm watching two separate stories develop and wondering how they will come together, I feel like I'm watching really badly edited shaky-cam footage from two separate camera crews.

Neither of these narrators particularly captured my interest or sympathies. Felix is a wizard. Wizards are cool, right? Except that, by about page 3, Felix was in major depression mode. Instead of talking to his lover about it, he flees to the sanctuary of the wizard who once abused him and raped him. The wizard abuses him and rapes him again, and Felix goes back for more, claiming that he simply "can't help it".

I'm given to understand that this is a realistic pattern of actions for an abuse victim to take: leave, temporarily, and then surrender to what they perceive is an inevitability. So I'm not trying to demean or diminish the horror of the abuse victim's experience here. Rather, I take issue with the fact that, by beginning the story *here*, Monette makes it really difficult for me to understand and sympathize with Felix. We don't have his backstory and his full relationship with Malkar; we don't understand what brought him to this point. All we can do is snap hungrily at the little crumbs Monette throws at us and hope that it's enough to see us through until the end of the book, when she makes that part clear.

Generally, it's a good idea to begin at the beginning of the story, which often means skipping over the boring parts in a character's early life. Sometimes, though, a little context is necessary to keep the reader on side. I mean, Monette bothered to include a prologue that—as far as I can tell—has nothing to do with the plot in particular. That seems like pages well spent!

Oh, and Mildmay? At first his jargon annoyed me, and I suppose you should take that as a compliment for Monette's ability to capture distinct voices for these two narrators. Gradually, his story did come to interest me, and his voice became less annoying. I suspect this happened at the same time Felix started going mad and his sections became sparser and less interesting. (Madness from a first-person perspective is hard to do effectively.) Mildmay's sanity, in contrast, seemed to at least offer the *prospect* of moving this story forward.

*Mélusine* is named after the city in which the first half of the book takes place. The book isn't really *about* the city, though. Monette has clearly created an interesting world populated by a vast and diverse cast of cultures, not to mention a number of competing schools of magic that all view each other with suspicion of the taint of heresy. She doesn't spend much time explaining these various schools, though, and while I appreciate the dedication to keeping exposition to a minimum, there's something to be said for fleshing out a world beyond dropping an unfamiliar name here and there. There is a fine line between exposition and description, where dropping too much of the one leads to forgetting too much of the other.

Maybe it's too much for me to expect a book titled after a city to be about that city. *Mélusine* is more about how Felix and Mildmay meet, the secret they discover that brings them together, and then the journey they take to uncover Felix's past. Unfortunately, that journey is *boring*. There are no monsters to slay, no detours, no quests. They stumble across another empire, book passage on a ship, get shipwrecked, and wind up ... exactly where they wanted to be!

**This entire book feels like filler, like the setup for the real story.** In the first act, Felix's master uses Felix's bound power to break the Virtu, a magical MacGuffin that allows the wizards of *Mélusine* to focus their spells more effectively. This is obviously a Big Deal, a kind of magical terrorist act. The fallout from this act, however, remains unclear and unresolved. We don't know if Felix is supposed to play a role in repairing the Virtu. We don't know if Felix will ever confront his former master and exact revenge. All we know is that Felix and Mildmay are together, and Felix isn't exactly mad any more (maybe).

A lot of stuff *seems* like it happens in this book, but make no mistake: nothing happens. This is a book whose plot consists of dragging two characters across a world that is poorly-described while switching viewpoints faster than a cat can regret jumping into a bathtub.

There is a good story lurking somewhere in here, with characters who can do it justice. But it needs more exposition, more patience with characterization, and less patience with plotting. *Mélusine* really just needs to breathe. It doesn't do that, and that makes it very difficult for me to praise.

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### **Sarah says**

Hrm. A hundred pages into this novel, I had to come back here to see if my friend's review was really as glowing as I remembered it to be. I'm baffled.

I'm struggling to keep interested in this book. This is a poorly-explained world, where magical and social elements are introduced in passing, but not fleshed out; the book itself is structured with a bizarrely flip-flopping POV, reminiscent of a soap opera, which changes so frequently as to prevent me from getting interesting in either of the intertwined stories. Do we really need to swap main characters every few pages? Every few paragraphs?

Most disappointing, perhaps, is that I can't seem to care at all for Felix, one of our two main characters. There certainly wasn't enough development prior to his decision to throw himself back under Malkar's heel for me to develop any attachment. And I really don't know why I'm supposed to feel any empathy for his character now. We've been told repeatedly that he's a powerful wizard, but are given no evidence of anything like; at the slightest provocation, he returns to his (one-dimensional, tritely evil) former master and promptly reclaims a drug addiction that leaves him passive and powerless for the remainder of what I've read. Um, what? I should care enough to read about this guy's self-destructive spiral in loving detail?

It's not that I don't enjoy a good anti-hero, mind you; it's not that I don't like the characters, but that I'm entirely indifferent to them. I hate to give up after seeing so many glowing reviews -- and I hate to toss aside a book after spending \$8 on it -- so I'll try another hundred pages or so before admitting defeat and sending this one to the sell-back pile.

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### **Lindsay says**

The first in a series called the Doctrine of Labyrinths, I can confirm that the series is well named. The plot meanders in parts, gets dead-ended in others and whole sections of interesting areas and characters get split off indiscriminately, while the actual resolution of the book is in the narrowest terms possible.

Felix Harrowgate is an arrogant fop of a wizard whose life in the wizard's castle of Mirador in the country of Mélusine quickly takes a dramatic turn for the worse due to the machinations of the master of his youth. Meanwhile, Mildmay, a young thief and assassin of the low town around the Mirador is heading for a meeting with Felix that will change his life.

The world-building here is good and the various cultures and sub-cultures are well done. The characters are interesting too, with far more flaws than redeeming features. Given how deeply damaged these people are, just making the basic journey of this book is an epic task. However, none of that serves to solve the basic issue with this book which is its glacial pacing and weird plot choices. Part of that can be excused as efforts to setup plot points for later books, but it doesn't help this book at all and offers no incentive for the reader to want to continue what will clearly be a harrowing series.

I'm probably one and done here. Meandering plots work ok if you're spending a lot of time with characters you like, but there's little to commend either of the main characters here other than their sheer will to survive, and secondary characters are shed with such little regard you get taught not to care about them.

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## **Punk says**

Fantasy. Something's rotten in Melusine and the Virtu, a collection of spells that protects the city's wizards, has been destroyed, sending the city into disorder. The story's told by two narrators: Felix -- wizard, drama queen, perpetual victim -- and Mildmay -- thief for hire, regular guy, and a hundred times less whiny than Felix. I hated Felix. I spent most of the book wishing he'd shut up and go away. He's a big wet blanket, cowardly and useless, and would be perfectly at home in a bad piece of fanfiction. If it wasn't for Mildmay, I would have given up on this, but I loved Mildmay. He's a street tough, uses "fuck" a lot, and just generally gets the job done, whatever it is.

This is a long book, almost 500 pages in paperback, and it starts off at a promising pace, but then we spend a lot of time being crazy (Felix) and going out to bars with our gold-digging girlfriend (Mildmay), and nothing really happens for several hundred pages. The story finally picks up again when Felix and Mildmay meet, and I found I could like Felix as long as it was Mildmay who was looking at him. Felix's own narration is as soggy as a teenaged girl without a date to the prom, but Mildmay's protective of Felix and finds his weepy craziness almost endearing. They don't meet until more than halfway through the book, though, so don't hold your breath on that.

Once I dragged myself over the enormous hurdle of all the made-up fantastical language (and there's a lot of it; I'm still not clear on half the words used to tell the passage of time), and once Felix and Mildmay join up for their quest, I really did enjoy the last half of the book. Things to recommend it: Mildmay's awesomeness and use of language ("Like I said, you could put the Yehergod militia in a string shopping bag and still have room for two heads of cabbage and a parsnip."); the fact that we eventually *do* get to go on a quest; and the varied sexualities represented as a matter of course. Now I either need to read the sequel right away before I forget how, or skip it entirely.

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## **Kaje Harper says**

This is a wonderfully imaginative fantasy, beautifully written and realized. Although one main character is gay, the other is not, and this is not a romance. That doesn't mean it isn't infused with a stubborn, heartfelt, irritated, immovable commitment on Mildmay's part. And a flashy, extravagant, mind-damaged, egotistical, painfully-undermined caring on Felix's part. The relationship between these two men, as much as the progression of the plot and their individual characters, keep the reader glued to the page.

The very first time I read this book, I kind of skimmed through some of the early parts of Mildmay's POV, before he and Felix come together. But the second time... ah, then I went slowly savoring both Mildmay's unique voice, and all the little points of his history and his attitude that would show up later to inform the story. Felix is great. Felix is excellent. But Mildmay, with his foul mouth and stubborn pride, and steadfast unshakable loyalty, makes these books.

5 stars, and a multiple reread. And every time, I have to at least go on to the second book, *The Virtu*, which is if anything better. Highly recommended for fantasy fans.

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## **Bec says**

After reading a very mixed bag of reviews, I've come to the conclusion that *Melusine* (and the whole *Doctrine of Labyrinths*) are books you either love or hate, with very little room in the middle. I confess I personally tend towards the former. The terminology is difficult to grapple with at first, because the style of narration leaves little room for explanation of the plethora of colloquialisms peppered throughout the novel. However, if you bear with it, it does become much easier to understand. The breadth and depth of Monette's world-building is very impressive. She has an eye for details and a phenomenal ability to combine traditional fantasy elements in new and intriguing ways. There are some very generic elements of these novels (sorcerers, thieves, assassins), but I never once found myself bored by them because she creates such interesting characters and combines a lot of standard fantasy tropes in new ways.

If you have difficulty dealing with some very dark sexual elements, these aren't the books for you. While I think some of the scenes in *Melusine* are probably the worst in the series, the issues they raise are played out all across the novels. There IS rape, there IS child abuse. However, I didn't find the way Monette dealt with them at all distasteful. The scenes are hard to read because they are horrible, but rape and abuse are never portrayed for the sake of titillation. She doesn't hesitate to explore the darker side of her characters' sexualities, but I find that much more realistic than pretending that everyone in the world happily has vanilla sex, and nobody ever suffers the ramifications of sexual abuse.

There is a fair amount of both heterosexual and homosexual sex, though nothing immensely graphic. Personally, I found it refreshing to find the full sexual spectrum being dealt with in a well-written fantasy novel.

They can be hardgoing at times, but only because Monette writes tragedy so very well. Love or hate the characters, they are always interesting. I know a lot of people strongly dislike Felix. Personally, I think he's a brilliant character, whose moments of malice and cruelty are cleverly offset by his own self-loathing and insecurities. It is very difficult to dislike Mildmay. Overall, I'd highly recommend these books. They are dark, and they won't be to everyone's taste, but they are also marvelously enthralling and kept me up at night finishing them.

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## **Jamie Collins says**

Read again in 2016 (part of my annual holiday wallowing in re-reads) and I'm still in agreement with my original review, with perhaps more emphasis on the extreme angst, particularly at the end, good grief.

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March 2012 review:

So Felix is a wizard who's driven mad when his evil master uses him to destroy a powerful magical thingamajig. Mildmay is a thief/assassin who gets hired by another wizard to track down Felix, for complicated and magical reasons. When Felix and Mildmay finally meet up they discover (view spoiler). Mildmay eventually ends up manhandling the crazy Felix halfway across the world to find a cure for him.

I wasn't impressed with the way the characters were introduced. We don't get a firm grip on Felix's character before he's driven mad. Mildmay is likable from the beginning (I like the way he talks) but we meet him just as he's becoming enamored of a client, and I didn't feel any chemistry (or see any plot significance) in that relationship.

The book is well-written, though, and it begins to get better when Mildmay takes up with the crippled wizard who's trying to find Felix. I liked the depiction of Felix's madness, even if it gets repetitive sometimes with all the fainting and cowering in fear. Overall the book is quite weepy and angsty, as both men have been abused and misused and there's not an ounce of self-esteem between the two of them.

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## **Robyn says**

3.5 rounded up to 4, because I liked the whole a great deal more than the individual parts. This introductory book to the series is definitely about character and world building, and I'm very curious to see where it goes next.

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