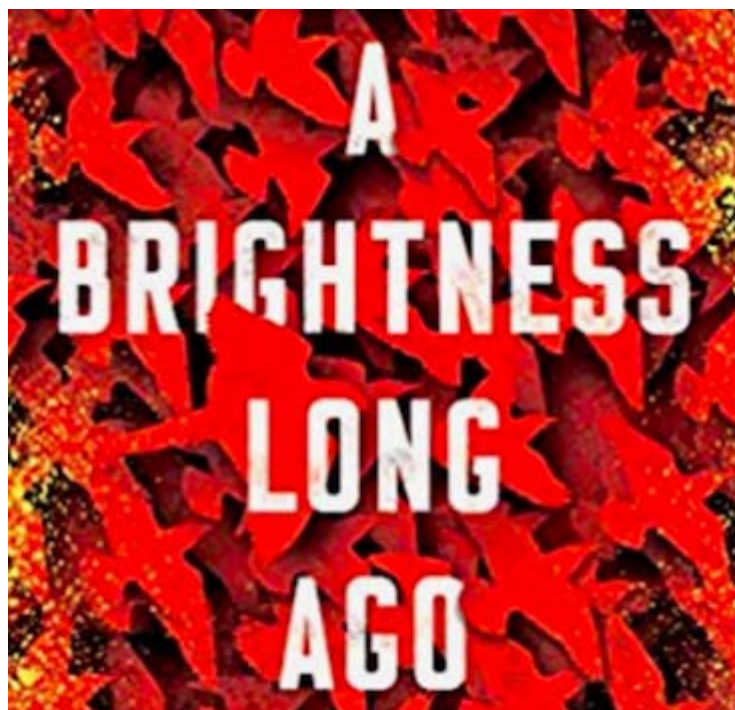


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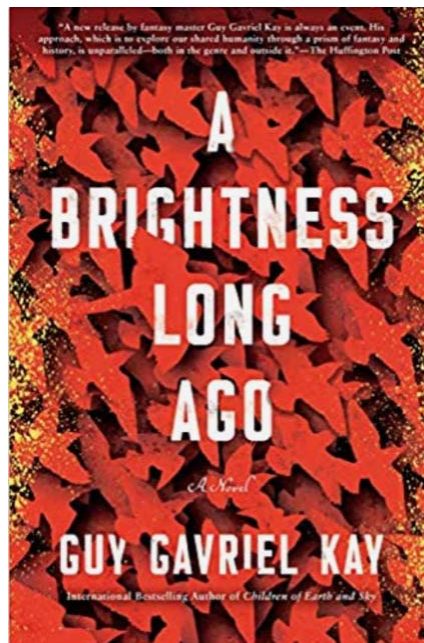


# 'A Brightness Long Ago'

## *Guy Gavriel Kay's Novels are Historical Fiction About a World Almost Like Our Own*

May 29, 2019 Michael Giltz

I waited years before finding the right moment to dive into the work of Canadian author Guy Gavriel Kay. In 2016, I finally read his stand-alone historical (?) novel *Children Of Earth And Sky*, which takes place in a time akin to the 1400s. It was terrific. Now I've just finished *A Brightness Long Ago*. Terrific again! It's sure to be one of my favorite books of the year.



The books don't quite read like Alexandre Dumas, but that's the easiest comparison I can make. Kay's novels boast the pleasures of a strong plot, duels, battles, romance, poison-kissed assassins, and young heroes naively rubbing shoulders with the mighty. Add a layer of thoughtfulness and a casual reflection on the vagaries of life, and you've got Kay.

*Brightness* is a little more focused than the sprawling cast of characters in *Children Of Earth And Sky*. Here Kay tells the story mostly through the actions of Danio Cerra. Born into the merchant class, Danio's smarts and luck gain him access to one of the most famous schools of the age.

His training there leads to his placement in the court of a brutal ruler nicknamed The Beast, known for raping and killing young women and men on a whim. But when business is good, the country stable and the Beast

otherwise reasonable, the aristocracy looks the other way. One night, so does Danio when he realizes the Beast's latest "victim" is not some trembling farm girl but likely an assassin.

Danio looks the other way instead of raising an alarm. He then impulsively helps the woman escape into the night when she finishes her work. Kay doesn't paint Danio's action in some dashing, noble light. Danio knows full well his choice means the death of The Beast, which is good. It also means his friend at court, the man directly responsible for security, will die as well, which is bad but unavoidable. On further consideration, it might also mean the death of a very young heir apparent, since small children coming into power rarely grow into manhood.

The moment comes, Danio acts, and the repercussions spread throughout the rest of the novel. Before we know it, Danio finds himself a pawn of sorts, caught in the middle of a fierce battle between two mercenaries. One is handsome and dashing and the other squat and disfigured, but both are excellent leaders of men, relatively decent...and determined to see the other man die.

Toss in that female assassin (who is of course beautiful, noble-born and daring to boot), a healer named Jelena determined to make her own way in the world, and about a dozen other vivid characters both major and minor, and you've got yourself a doozy of a story.

## Different Worlds

I referred to Kay as writing an historical (?) novel since people usually describe him as a writer of fantasy. His breakthrough work was a trilogy known as The Fionavar Tapestry, in the classic fantasy mode (The series has since expanded to four books).

Ever since, however, Kay has delivered novels that draw inspiration from our world's past without being beholden to it. Typically, here he calls Venice Seressa. The city of Constantinople becomes Sarantium, besieged (from a Western perspective) by the Asharites.

Even the two mercenaries locked in mortal hatred have a basis in Italian history, namely Federico Montefeltro and Sigismondo Malatesta. Kay describes himself as using "history as a scaffold for invention." So history buffs will note many parallels between Kay's novel and the real world, but can never rest assured they know exactly how things will turn out.

Why bother; why not just write a work of historical fiction? Kay's approach pays dividends by allowing me to experience the shock of an event in history more fully than I ever imagined it before. The simple act of renaming places and times left me blissfully

unaware of what to expect, something unlikely to occur if I were reading, say, a novel faithfully based on the War Of The Roses.

Even better, he creates characters so rich and diverting that the death of even a minor one will knock you for a loop. And since they're all "made up," no one can complain the author changed the fate of some real world nobleman. Kay is also wonderful at showing a character come into his or her own, like the High Patriarch (Pope) suddenly taking his faith seriously, or the foppish aristocrat starting to care about his place in the world.

More broadly, Kay acknowledges the randomness of life, how a brief moment or impulse can branch you off forever into an unexpected and perhaps unwelcome direction. That perspective makes this grand adventure quite moving. Kay never lets you forget the real cost of everything that happens, from war to love to deciding whether to catch up with the large party on the road ahead of you or take a side path and go around them. The choice matters.

It's quite a feat to be rousing, amusing and thoughtful all at once. Kay manages this so often because he's *not* trapped in a world of the past where we already know how it all turns out. His novels feel "real" because of his artistry and not because they got the dates and clothing and geography right. Perhaps it doesn't matter what names you give to a city or time, whether inspired by the Tang Dynasty (his novel *Under Heaven*), Wessex/England during the Viking Invasions (his novel *The Last Light Of The Sun*) or even Fionavar (Kay's



*Guy Gavriel Kay*

own “first of all worlds,” depicted in The Fionavar Tapestry).

Maybe, after all, every novel is a work of fantasy.

**(Berkley, May 14, 2019)**

Tags: A Brightness Long Ago, Children Of Earth and Sky, Guy Gavriel Kay

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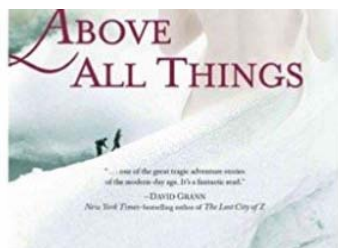
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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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