

UNICORN TRIANGLE



PATRICIA A. McKILLIP

Praise for Patricia A. McKillip

“There are no better writers than Patricia A. McKillip.”

—Stephen R. Donaldson, author of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*

“Intricate, beautiful. . . .”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“A master storyteller.”

—*Strange Horizons*

“Nothing less than masterly.”

—*Booklist*

“Lush imagery and wry humor. . . . McKillip’s rich language conveys real strangeness and power.”

—*Starlog*

“World Fantasy Award–winner McKillip can take the most common fantasy elements—dragons and bards, sorcerers and shape-shifters—and reshape them in surprising and resonant ways.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“McKillip skillfully knits disparate threads into a rewardingly rich and satisfying story.”

—*Amazon*

Praise for *Dreams of Distant Shores*

“McKillip (*Wonders of the Invisible World*), winner of the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement, collects nine dazzling shorter pieces (both originals and reprints) in this outstanding collection. The brief, creepy “Weird” opens the volume, merging an oddly romantic picnic in a bathroom and a mysterious threat outside into something that exists in a darkly beautiful interstitial place. The longest piece, “Something Rich and Strange,” which appeared originally as a standalone novella in Brian Froud’s *Faerielands* series, is an ecological fairy tale that contains the most gorgeous of McKillip’s prose (“her blind stare of pearl and wormwood”)—and the weakest of her plots, but even weaker McKillip is well worth reading. The newer stories also shine. “Mer” is a small gem about

a nameless witch, a fishing village, and a mermaid statue. “Edith and Henry Go Motoring” features a toll bridge that leads travelers on an unexpected journey. Beyond the short fiction, the volume finishes with an essay on writing high fantasy, and an appreciation of McKillip’s work by renowned fantasist Peter S. Beagle. Fans of exquisite prose and ethereal fantasy will need to own this.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“A young couple trade odd stories in a bathroom as something rages outside. An artist calls upon his muse, who answers him through an unfinished painting. A musical band of witches takes on a dark force during their bar performance. The seven ethereal tales (including three new ones), collected here touch on people’s dreams and desires. Also featured is McKillip’s 2002 essay on writing high fantasy and Peter S. Beagle’s afterword, “Dear Pat,” an appreciation of McKillip’s work. VERDICT: McKillip (*Wonders of the Invisible World*) once more enchants with this volume, which fantasy readers will devour as they are transported into multiple realities.”

—*Library Journal*

“VERDICT This collection of fascinating and haunting tales that will linger with readers is a strong addition to short story and fantasy collections; hand to fans of Holly Black, Robin McKinley, and Donna Jo Napoli.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Elegant and absorbing, [McKillip’s] work never reads as stiff or formal, as some fantasy stories can lean toward, and the language, while beautiful, never loses the reader, but instead remains both lyrical and deeply visceral.”

—*Manhattan Book Review*

“Absolutely spellbinding. It has been a very long time since we read a gathering of short stories as perfect and beguiling as these.”

—*Starburst*, 10 of 10 stars

“McKillip’s prose is both lovely and thought-provoking. Highly recommended to readers who enjoy fantastical short works.”

—*Fantasy Literature*

“Lovely prose . . . *Dreams of Distant Shores* is for the discerning fantasy reader.”

—*Elitist Book Reviews*

“Patricia A. McKillip’s *Dreams of Distant Shores* is a stunningly beautiful and magnificent short story collection filled with excellent high fantasy. It’s a perfect example of what lyrical fantasy authors are capable of achieving in modern fantasy fiction, because each of the stories is captivating and offers something new to readers.”
—*Risingshadow*

“A portal to the immanent magical worlds that McKillip convincingly suggests are nearby.”
—*Locus*

“A new Patricia McKillip book is always a cause for celebration . . . There’s not a wrong [story] note here”
—*Fantasy & Science Fiction*

“Glimpses of things which remain timeless, nameless, and true.”
—*Strange Horizons*

“Each tale felt like a dream permeated by a different style of magic . . . An excellent collection.”
—*Worlds Without End*

“I love Patricia McKillip’s novels, but even more, I am passionate about her brilliant short stories—those coruscating jewels that are both remarkable for their language, their power, their wit, and their depth. She writes pure fantasy and historical fantasy with equal ease. More, more please.”
—Jane Yolen, author of *Briar Rose*, *Sister Emily’s Lightship*, *Devil’s Arithmetic*, and *Sister Light, Sister Dark*

“Ever since finding and loving *The Riddle-Master of Hed* many years ago, I have read everything Patricia McKillip has written. You should too. Start with this book!”
—Garth Nix, author of *Sabriel* and the *Keys to the Kingdom* series

“Anyone about to open this book is a very lucky person indeed. You are about to encounter mysteries, monsters jewels, songs, witches, a treasure chest of story. Here are magic worlds, places of enchantment, and a wonderful, lyrical voice to guide you through them.”
—Lisa Goldstein, author of *The Red Magician* and *The Uncertain Places*

“Some authors we read for their characters and their plots, others for the beauty of their language. I read Pat McKillip for all three. She’s gifted beyond compare, a national treasure who should be cherished by all lovers of literature, and *Dreams of Distant Shores* is a perfect example of why I hold her in such high esteem.”

—Charles de Lint, author of *The Riddle of the Wren* and *The Blue Girl*

“Absolutely spellbinding. It has been a very long time since we read a gathering of short stories as perfect and beguiling as these. 10/10 stars.”

—*Starburst Magazine*

“These are the types of fantasies that open you to the fae and just don’t let go immediately. I felt like I had become part of the wind and words, floating around waiting to be reality . . . recommending this to any and all people with imagination”

—*In Pursuit of My Own Library*

“*Dreams of Distant Shores* by Patricia A. McKillip is unique, captivating, and a work of art.”

—*Luxury Reading*

“*Dreams of Distant Shores* will deserve a place in the collections of modern fantasy fans.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Patricia A. McKillip displays an amazing imagination in *Dreams of Distant Shores*. Each story is unique. Each story has vivid setting and engaging characters. The imagery is absolutely beautiful. Surprises are the norm in these tales, so prepare to be entertained.”

—*Whiskey with My Book*

Praise for Wonders of the Invisible World

“McKillo’s is the first name that comes to mind when I’m asked whom I read myself.”

—Peter S. Beagle, author, *The Last Unicorn*

“Endlessly astonishing and impressive fantasist McKillip (*The Bards of Bone Plain*) travels the shadowy twilight realm between worlds and returns with the raw stuff of dreams.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Mesmerizing. . . . Any collection of McKillip’s short stories will be a valuable asset to any library and a joy to her many fans.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

“Anybody who loves fantasy—not just for what most fantasy does, but for what the genre is really capable of—should definitely pick this book up. It’s like a perfect encapsulation of fantasy writing at its most brave and beautiful.”

—*io9.com*

“A casket full of wonders. I think each one is my favorite, until I read the next. McKillip has the true Mythopoeic imagination. Here lies the border between our world and that of Faerie.”

—P. C. Hodgell, author of the *Kencyrath* series

“This brilliant new collection puts on display the audacity, the warmth, the intelligence, and depth of [McKillip’s] huge and magnificent talent.”

—Peter Straub, author of *Ghost Story* and *A Dark Matter*

“The lively and enchanting stories in *Wonders of the Invisible World* certainly deserve all the accolades I can summon.”

—Paul Goat Allen, *Barnes and Noble.com*

“I loved all the stories in this collection, and if I still have to tell you to try this out, well, you haven’t been reading my review. . . . Patricia McKillip is a master at what she does. Strongly recommended.”

—*Locus*

“*Wonders of the Invisible World* is a wonderful collection of stories full of wit and insight wrapped in beautiful, effortless prose. McKillip’s ability to convey so much in so few words is impressive, as is her ability with storytelling, characterization, and thematic elements.”

—*Fantasy Cafe*

Other books by Patricia A. McKillip

The Riddle-Master trilogy and Omnibus Editions

- The Riddle-Master of Hed* (1976)
- Heir of Sea and Fire* (1977)
- Harpist in the Wind* (1979)
- Riddle of Stars* (1979)
- Quest of Riddlemasters* (1982)
- The Quest of Riddlemaster* (1983)
- Riddle-Master* (1999)
- The Riddle-Master's Game* (2001)

Kyreol duology

- Moon-Flash* (1984)
- The Moon and the Face* (1985)

The Cygnet duology

- The Sorceress and the Cygnet* (1991)
- The Cygnet and the Firebird* (1993)

Other Works

- The House on Parchment Street* (1973)
- The Throne of the Erill of Sherril* (1973)
- The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* (1974)
- The Night Gift* (1976)
- Stepping from the Shadows* (1982)
- Fool's Run* (1987)
- The Changeling Sea* (1988)
- Something Rich and Strange* (A Tale of Brian Droud's Faerielands)
(1994)
- The Book of Atrix Wolfe* (1995)
- Winter Rose* (1996)
- Song of the Basilisk* (1998)
- The Tower at Stony Wood* (2000)
- Ombria in Shadow* (2002)
- In the Forests of Serre* (2003)
- Alphabet of Thorn* (2004)
- Od Magic* (2005)
- Harrowing the Dragon* (2005)
- Soltice Wood* (2006)
- The Bell at Sealey Head* (2008)
- The Bards of Bone Plain* (2010)
- Wonders of the Invisible World* (2012)
- Dreams of Distant Shores* (2016)
- Kingfisher* (2016)



UNICORN
TRIANGLE
PATRICIA A.
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TACHYON
SAN FRANCISCO

Unicorn Triangle

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Cover art and design © 2017 by Thomas Canty

Interior design by James DeMaiolo

Tachyon Publications LLC

1459 18th Street #139

San Francisco, CA 94107

www.tachyonpublications.com

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Series Editor: Jacob Weisman

Project Editor: Jill Roberts

E-book ISBN: 978-1-61696-285-2

First E-book Edition: 2017

UNICORN
TRIANGLE

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I get flashbacks now and then. What it was like. Then. Before. The moonlight a path of diamonds and ivory, suspended between the mist of trees whose names I knew, every one of them, as well as who had dropped what nut that made this tree, that meant this name. My watching eyes as dark as night, my pelt as sleek and perfect as the moon at full, my hooves and spiraling horn forged of that dream, that glittering. All the scents and secret whisperings: water, brambles opening flowers, sharpening thorns, bracken crumbling oh so slowly, a sift, a shift of a splinter of wood, a break of driest leaf spending a timeless moment edging apart, resettling itself like a dreamer fitting itself into sleep, into earth. The sound of the wings of the Luna moth fluttering toward that white fire, spellbound by the moon.

Then. I almost remember my name.

Then someone says a name, over and over, until I realize it must mean me.

Erin heaves a sigh, and squeezes air out of a pillow to wrestle it into its shroud. Case. Whatever.

"Jeez Louise, Lisa, I swear your brain lives in a different time zone."

That seems so likely, that different time zone, that I go there to test its truth. It is a step away, but farther, I guess, than anyone even close can see. A pillow brings me back, bouncing off my head.

"Lisa! We've got eight more rooms before check-in!"

Maybe so, but I suddenly flash back to the sorcerer's face, his final expression, the last he could ever say with it before he flung the spell out of himself with his dying breath—so strong it was even his fingernails splintered and his eyelashes fell out—and I was left standing alone, staring at the little, wicked smile frozen in his eyes. My horn, which had pierced his heart, turned to moon-mist and disappeared. So had my forelegs, my lovely hooves. I lost all balance, toppled forward into the rose of blood blooming out of his chest.

Now here I am, changing sheets, emptying little refrigerators of half-eaten chip dips, sloshing brushes around in the bathroom, vacuuming sand, tossing shells people had carried back to the room and then forgotten to pack. Over the balcony they go, despite Erin's protests. I haven't hit anybody yet.

Listen, I was trying to say when they discovered me in the brambles, when they asked my name. *List. Lis.*

So. That's what I've become.

I didn't know what language to speak those first words. I've been nearly everywhere in the world, though not entirely. Not, I think, in that ancient land where mountains have crumbled to the bone and tall, feisty, hornless creatures abound, whose young peep out of pouches on their bellies. Nor in the coldest places, though it is—or was—said that I swam in the sea. I tried that once, tangled in some sailor's dream of horns and unicorns. I didn't like it; I smelled brine for days, though it had only been a dream.

In other lands, I go disguised. I wear the face and features of the creatures they know as unicorn: it seems polite. In one, my horn might be colored like a rainbow; in another I have a beard, and my hooves are cleft. In yet another, I have scales like a lizard and my single horn branches like a tree. In some, I speak words of wisdom; in others, I just rage and bite. In those where I belong to earth and time, I am gorgeously ugly. In most, I am mostly seen in tale and memory. I am made of dreams, of thread, of colored ink. I am ancient yet unforgotten; everyone recognizes me and no one ever sees me.

Except the sorcerer.

I managed to get a few words right when I was found; the sorcerer's blood on me did the rest. They thought I'd tumbled into some blackberry brambles along the hillside below the hotel. They have never—not even Erin—decided what land I came from, what language I spoke when they found me, or even if my tongue is tangled by my slow wits or by my bad translation.

I see no point in trying to tell the truth.

Nobody knew what to do with me after they found me. I couldn't tell them: I had no idea, either. I understood them, but I could barely speak. I kept trying to find my balance, and falling over. *Where's the rest of me?* I asked, or tried to. I had just impaled a sorcerer through his heart with my horn; I was still enraged, still trembling with the exhausting battle to elude his sorcery. I wanted to run as far, as fast as I could down the bridge of light between the sea and the setting moon until that placid, ancient face calmed me. Instead I was tangled in hair and kept falling down. I had hands where my forehooves had been. I had seen enough humans to know that they weren't slender, graceful, pampered ladies' fingers, either. They could have heaved a sack of flour, or swung an ax. Hair the color of my vanished pelt, ivory and moonlight, tumbled out of my head and spilled over me like a cloak to my great, ungainly feet. It hid at least some of my unclothed skin, at which I stared in horror and fascination. As did others, until a modest young virgin tried to pull some morning glory vines over me.

He said, "Somebody call the police."

"Hospital," a woman said briefly. "Look at the blood on her."

"It's not mine," I said, or tried to; they looked at me with complete bewilderment. "It's the sorcerer's."

"Russian?" somebody guessed.

“Doesn’t sound like my high school Spanish.”

“Something Nordic?”

“It’s more lilty—maybe French?”

A little girl, staring at me, pulled the finger out of her mouth and said, “It is the language of bells.” She smiled at me, as though we shared a secret, and I wanted to kneel then and there and lay my head in her lap.

But.

There was more chatter, more of me falling over, more alarmed voices, then more vast, wailing alarms. The little girl vanished. As the hours passed, I grew to understand the lights, the buildings, the uniforms, the things done to me, why they asked the questions they did, over and over, until I fell asleep and then fell off my chair, and woke up again to more of everything all over again.

They argued incessantly—yes, no, yes—about me: as in what to do with. I finally stopped listening, sat drooping in ugly garments and gave myself up to my memories, my yearnings, my overwhelming despair. I was a unicorn without a horn slumped in a chair, with no name and nowhere to go.

I had won the battle and lost my life. And I had not a star-glint of an idea why the sorcerer had attacked me. It was not the familiar human motive: to kill me and cut off my horn to use for cleaning sullied waters or detecting poison in unexpected places. The sorcerer had fought to his death when he could have run; he used his last breath to destroy us both.

Why? I wondered, in my morass of bewilderment, regret, pain for my lost limbs, my lost life. What had I ever done to him?

They prodded me; I got up. They asked yet more questions; I stared at them blankly, asking them why I should care. They moved, nudged me again; I followed. More talking, face to face, face to phone, more standing, more papers signed, more talking. Phones sang, gabbled, sang again. Then a voice on one of the tiny phones screeched like a raven and even I stood up a little straighter.

One of the uniforms took the phone. Every time he tried to speak, the voice again, like a hoof grating on rock, like wood tearing itself raggedly in two. Finally, he said the only words he was allowed: "Yes, ma'am."

The voice cooed like a dove in love and went still.

So here I am in the hundred-year-old beach hotel, changing sheets and bars of soap, and wondering what to do with myself. I've learned to form more useful words with my unfamiliar lips. Understanding words and those who spoke them was never the problem; I was around at the beginning of their language. I know what they want from me—a detailed human history from birth to here—and I haven't one to give them. For a long time, a time of full moons, bleak skies, tossing ships, new moons, warm rain, golden days, sandy footprints on the carpets, I even forgot to wonder whose train-wreck of a voice had brought me to that place.

Then the phone rings in a room Erin and I are cleaning; Erin answers it.

"Yeah?" She listens, then hangs up and says to me, "Geegee wants you."

"Who?"

"Geegee. In the office. Now."

So I go. I don't have the slightest who Geegee is, nor do I care. Maybe, I think without hope, this Geegee will fire me, and I can spend the summer among the brambles, foraging for wild fruit, then lie me down in the lace of tide as the chill winds rouse, and let the sea drift me to the moon.

Nobody is behind the registration desk. The inner office door is open. I peer into that, and my heart tries to grow wings and fly.

The young girl's eyes meet mine, seeing me, knowing me. Only this time they are in a face with lines like a walnut shell, all rippling together as she smiles. She is a small bundle of old bones in skirts and various scarves and sweaters, sitting in a rocking chair by a window, her feet dangling above the floor.

She says my name.

I feel my bones try to rearrange themselves, trying to remember the shape they once knew. But, powerful as that voice she has is, it can't pull me out of what I have become. The lines on her face shift, hope and power blurring into rue.

"Dang," she says softly, while I scramble around for the pieces of my thoughts.

"Who—what—?"

"You can call me Geegee. Short for great-grandmother." She shrugs a little. "Not enough greats by a long shot, but who's counting?"

"You almost—"

"Almost is no better than not. No better at all."

"Who are you?" I ask, I plead, for I haven't seen such eyes, such knowledge, such recognition, anywhere else in this barren time where not even the moon remembers me.

She says nothing, just pats her knees, and I sink to mine, crawl to her, wrap my arms around her skirts, lean against her like some giant child finding solace in those ancient bones. She slides a hand down my head, pats my back.

"I've been waiting for you for a very long time," she says. "I was there with you when the sorcerer sent you into the future. I was the princess you never saw."

"Hah?" I say into her skirts. Then I am quiet, remembering again the smile of triumph in the sorcerer's dead eyes. I think, barely understanding myself: this future would explain that smile. Another word intrudes. I don't want to think about it; I just want to kneel there at the old woman's feet, feeling her stroke my hair.

Princess?

"He's not dead, you know," she says, and I feel my heart again, tightening this time, reforming itself, growing hard, harder on the outside, sealing the seething fury within. I lift my face, stare at her blindly. Surely she

would not say that, she would never light that flame unless she knew. I feel my wildness rage against where my hooves should be, my horn.

"I killed him." I do not recognize my voice.

"There is a world," she says very gently, her hand on my forehead where the horn once was, "in which I am not old, and he is not dead." I hear myself make a noise in some language I do not know. Her fingers, warm and steady on my brow, quiet me. "I was foolish then. I made you into something more than wild and beautiful; my heart fashioned you into someone who did not exist. My heart wished you human, someone perfect, magical, who could love me. Silly girl, I was. Foolish princess. But no more foolish than the sorcerer, who looked at me and wanted me changed into someone who could love him. He could love only me; I could love only you. You stood between us, in his eyes. If you disappeared, he thought, my heart must turn to him. Together he and I turned you into some impossible creature who could never exist in any kind of peace." Her fingers brush down my cheek, slide beneath my chin, and draw my face up so that she can look into my eyes. "He didn't notice me watching, either, when he fought you. That was his mistake." I stare into hers, wondering if she could see beneath the pale human surface of mine to the midnight within. For an instant, I see the memory in her eyes: her youth and beauty, the dream that she had made of me.

But I am far, far older than she, and wilder than she could imagine. "Where is he?" I ask.

"It took me all this time to find him," she answers a bit impatiently, annoyed with herself. "All this time since you tumbled here. Of course I learned a few things, searching all those futures where you weren't."

I eye her silently, wondering. In the world the sorcerer had tossed me out of, I would have recognized the magic in her even before I ever saw the princess. But I'd never noticed that lovelorn maiden trailing hopelessly after me. Maybe, I realize, she hadn't been a budding sorceress then. Or a virgin, either, for that matter. Which, on the whole, was none of my business. But I wonder suddenly what she truly wanted from me.

So I ask her.

"Well, of course," she answers without surprise, "my passion for you had nothing much at all to do with love."

"Of course," I echo with bewilderment.

"I wanted to be you. All that power. All that beauty. Since you inspired me to be what I have become, I feel I owe you a bit of help." She pats my cheek, then stirs, hands on the rocker arms, rising, so that I am forced to let go of the safe-haven of her strength, her understanding heart. I move reluctantly; she adds, as I get to my feet, "That's why we need the sorcerer."

"I know I killed him," I protest. "I know I did."

Her mouth tightens; I glimpse the lightning glint of power in her eyes. "He is a wily one," she murmurs grimly. "He fled that body you killed on the flow of its last breath."

"Where is he?" I demand. "I'll—"

"You'll what?" she asks, reminding me, with a sweeping glance, of the awkward, unwieldy body he left me in. It had its weapons, I realize, an arsenal between my great feet and my big, hard head. Not a pretty thought, I know, but handy, so to speak.

She adds, maybe reading my mind, "We want him alive."

"We."

"We need him to undo with his own power what he has done to you. It is a twisted, tangled piece of work, that spell. But I have learned a thing or two, by now, and I can make him eat his words."

"How?" I ask incredulously.

"By giving him what he thought he wanted."

"You."

She gives me a tortoise-smile, thin-lipped, leathery. "Something like that. You'll see. You don't have a reason to hang around this place? No one to say farewell to?" I shake my head. "Neither do I. Say good-bye to Geegee."

"What is your name?" I wonder as she holds out her hand for mine. Then someone hits the bell at the reception desk, and the hotel, with Geegee still sitting in her rocker, fades away around us along with my question.

In that nameless place, I see again the dimensions of the princess's sorcery: how much she has learned since she shadowed me and I never noticed her, any more than I paid heed to what clung to my hooves and followed me everywhere. She changes into white fire, moonlight, foam-laced wave, midnight.

She becomes me.

And then she changes me.

And I, beautiful and virgin in any world, no words left
in me of any language, can only follow her helplessly to
watch her battle for my lost self.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia A. McKillip is the bestselling author of more than thirty much-beloved fantasy novels, including *The Riddle-Master of Hed*, *Harpist in the Wind*, and *The Sorceress and the Cygnet*. Her short fiction has recently been collected in *Wonders of the Invisible World* and *Dreams of Distant Shores*. She has received the World Fantasy Award for *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* (a Fall 2017 Tachyon Publication), *Ombria in Shadow*, and *Solstice Wood*, for which she also received the Mythopoeic Award. McKillip has also received the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. In 2015, three of her novels are being collected in the prestigious SF Gateway Omnibus series.

She lives in Portland, Oregon.