

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW | YOUNG ADULT

Chimeras, Angels and a Girl in Prague

By CHELSEY PHILPOT OCT. 14, 2011

Any book that opens with “Once upon a time” is inviting high expectations. It’s a phrase that inevitably evokes fairy tales and leather-bound classics about epic adventures, setting up the anticipation that readers will discover worlds filled with magic. And it may be a cliché, but it’s not necessarily an unwelcome one.

In this case, the story that follows, by Laini Taylor, a 2009 National Book Award finalist (“Lips Touch: Three Times”), is a breath-catching romantic fantasy about destiny, hope and the search for one’s true self that doesn’t let readers down. Taylor has taken elements of mythology, religion and her own imagination and pasted them into a believably fantastical collage.

Starting with 17-year-old Karou, who is far from a typical teenager, with hair that grows in a bright ultramarine, no rebellious dye required. That’s not the only thing setting her apart from her fellow students at the Art Lyceum of Bohemia in Prague. The monsters Karou draws — one woman who is serpent from the waist down, another with human eyes but a parrot’s beak — are not of her imagination. They are real chimeras, demons, and they are the closest thing she has to family. When Karou sees a crow with bat wings, she knows it is summoning her for yet another trip to collect animal and human teeth.

What Karou doesn’t know is why Brimstone, a stern, horned monster with the golden eyes of a crocodile who is a kind of father figure to her, needs the teeth. But she realizes the wishes he grants her are worth her troubles, allowing Karou to make

her ex-boyfriend itch in unmentionable places, eradicate her own pimples and cause a rival's eyebrows to grow unattractively bushy.

The teeth-collecting mystery is one of many in Karou's life. Why does she have hamsa tattoos on the palms of her hands? Why does she feel so desperately lost and lonely? And why can't she shake the feeling that there is "another life she was meant to be living?"

Just as she did in her story collection, "Lips Touch: Three Times," Taylor — who, like her protagonist, is an artist with an unnatural hair color, bright pink — tackles themes of longing and self-actualization with a sympathetic understanding of her audience. Who as a teenager didn't feel like a chimera, a mix of seemingly disparate parts forming an uncertain self?

As Karou runs Brimstone's increasingly frantic errands, traveling between magic portals to a black-market auction in Paris and a bazaar in Marrakesh, beautiful winged beings around the globe are burning black handprints into the portal doors, marking them for reasons that soon become violently apparent.

Enter the love interest. Akiva is a seraph, an angel, and an attractive one. "Oh, thought Karou, staring at him. Oh. Angel indeed." She is immediately drawn to him: "He was the most beautiful thing Karou had ever seen. Her first thought, incongruous but overpowering, was to memorize him so she could draw him later." Akiva, likewise, finds himself captivated by Karou even though he knows she works for the chimera, the seraphim's enemies in a longstanding war. The first time they meet he nearly kills her. The second time, she him.

After a series of supernatural fires causes Karou's world to collapse, her pull toward Akiva and his toward her feel powerful enough to be destiny. Each kiss is given the importance of Paris's lips meeting those of Helen of Troy. "This new thing that sprang up between them, it was . . . *astral*. It reshaped the air, and it was *in* her, too — a warming and softening, a *pull* — and for that moment, her hands in his, Karou felt as powerless as starlight tugged toward the sun in the huge, strange warp of space." (Ah, teenagers.) And as with the lovers whose romance launched a war, love between the blue-haired girl and the angel is fraught.

Secondary characters, like Karou’s pixie-size human best friend, Zuzana, provide humor and wisdom. The high-stakes action scenes — I’m not giving away too much by saying there is plenty of seraphim-on-chimera combat — balance out the more contemplative moments. And the world-building descriptions and language stop your heart and then, like a defibrillator, start it up again. Prague is “a city of alchemists and dreamers,” where “Gothic steeples stood ready to impale fallen angels,” and new love is a “sweet tango.”

As I raced through the final pages, it took longer than it should have for me to realize the obvious: the ending was not coming. “Daughter of Smoke and Bone” is a series opener. I should have known better. I wanted this novel to be an epic, complete in itself. But series are hot items in teenage lit, and Taylor leaves plenty of questions unanswered for sequels. Like a woman who has waited hours for a date, I felt stood up — but like a hopeless romantic, I will be back for more.

Karou’s first story ends with an anguished epiphany, the promise of a new adventure and, of course, what Emily Dickinson called “the thing with feathers” and what Brimstone calls “the real magic,” hope.

DAUGHTER OF SMOKE AND BONE

By Laini Taylor

418 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$18.99. (Young adult; ages 15 and up)

Chelsey Philpot is a book review editor at *School Library Journal*.

A version of this review appears in print on October 16, 2011, on Page BR20 of the *Sunday Book Review* with the headline: *Unearthly Delights*.