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## *Ysabel*

by  
Guy Gavriel Kay  
(New York: Roc, 2007)

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### **Author:**

Guy Gavriel Kay is best known to his fans for his historical fantasies, novels set in worlds that could be — but aren't — medieval France, 15th-century Italy, Byzantium, or Britain in the age when Celts and Vikings collided. *Ysabel* seems at first to be a radical departure, but it reflects Kay's ongoing concern with the ways in which personal dramas can interact with unrecognized forces to take on historical force.

Kay was born in 1954 in Saskatchewan; he has two brothers. Kay's literary tastes were shaped by some myths and fables he heard as a small child and by his own omnivorous reading habits; his earliest introduction to fantasy came from Greek mythology and fairy tales, a taste later supplemented by authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Fritz Leiber, and Lord Dunsany. Still, as a career choice, writing came in third to playing for the Toronto Maple Leafs or becoming a lawyer. While he was an undergraduate at the University of Manitoba, working toward a B.A. in Philosophy, Kay became acquainted with Christopher Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien's son. Christopher invited Kay to help him edit his father's last uncompleted work, the fragmentary *Silmarillion*. As Kay put it, "Who in their right mind would NOT have been interested in the project?"

(<http://www.brightweavings.com/ggkswords/guygavrielkay.htm>).

The year working on the *Silmarillion* reawakened Kay's interest in writing, but he feared that it was not a profession to be relied upon, so he returned to Canada to pursue the law. Although he earned his law degree in 1978 and was called to the Bar of Ontario in 1982, he never practiced.

Instead, Kay left Canada after law school to write his first novel, which is unpublished, and wrote for television and film projects. His first published project, *The Summer Tree*, appeared in 1984; it was the first volume in a trilogy consciously modeled on Tolkien's work. (The other two volumes in the trilogy include *The Wandering Fire* and *The Darkest Road*, both published in 1986.) His first stand-alone novel, *Tigana* (1990), set the pattern for his later work. Set in a world modeled on the turbulent cultural and political history of Italy, it nonetheless addresses critical issues for our own time about cultural identity and oppression and the ways in which political forces can become intensely personal and vice versa. Later novels, including *A Song for Arbonne* (1992), *The Lions of al-Rassan* (1995), the two volumes of The Sarantine Mosaic (*Sailing to Sarantium*

[1999] and *Lord of Emperors* [2000]), and *The Last Light of the Sun* (2004), are all set in fictional analogues of historical settings. All portray worlds on the cusp of sweeping change, but Kay's works focus on the impact these changes have on particular individuals.

Kay lives in Toronto with his wife and two sons, though the family makes frequent sojourns abroad, as it has become Kay's habit to write his novels in the context of their settings. *Ysabel* was written during a year's stay in Provence.

### **Summary:**

In Provence, the past does not lie quietly. Fifteen-year-old Ned Marriner discovers the truth of this adage the hard way when he encounters a mysterious man inside the Saint-Sauveur cathedral in Aix-en-Provence. Ned is in Provence with his father, a famous photographer in the process of shooting pictures for a new book about the region, while his mother is working in Darfur with Doctors Without Borders. Neither father nor son is happy about Meghan Marriner's journey to one of the most dangerous places on earth; their worry for her is a constant undertone to their own time in Provence.

Ned and Kate Wenger, a cute, clever American girl Ned also meets in the cathedral, discover the leather-jacketed man climbing out of a grate in the floor of the cathedral and carrying a very large knife. The man warns them away. "You have blundered into a corner of a very old story," he tells them. "It is no place for children" (p. 32). Driven partly by his native obstinacy and partly by the sting of having been dismissed as a child, Ned explores the cavern the man came from. What he finds there — and in the cathedral garden later — both frightens and intrigues him. He knows things, he realizes, that he shouldn't, about the cathedral's history and about the nature of the man, who again warns them away from him.

Ned has every intention of heeding the warning. He has his mother to worry about, and his developing relationship with Kate to puzzle over. Not to mention the way his father's hyper-organized assistant Melanie keeps treating him like a kid. Plus, strange things begin happening to him, most frighteningly, a sudden migraine on the site of an ancient battlefield near Mont Sainte-Victoire, a searing pain that turns the world blood red, leaving the taste of blood in his mouth and the feel of it on his skin. He is, he realizes, "seeing and *feeling* the presence of massive, violent death. A slaughter, the world soaked in blood" (p. 68). He is somehow intimately connected to the history of this place.

Still, Ned and Kate can't resist the mystery. When they ignore the advice of the mysterious man and visit Entremont, a Celtic fortress, on the eve of Beltaine, a Celtic holy day, they are swept up into the drama beyond extrication. Ned and Kate are trapped in Entremont as the Beltaine ceremony begins; panicked, Ned calls Melanie for a ride home. When she appears on the scene at an inopportune

moment, Melanie is claimed by one of the players in this ancient, dangerous story. Ysabel takes Melanie's body for her own so that she may reenact with Phelan, the man Ned and Kate met in the cathedral, and another man named Cadell, a love triangle dating back 2,000 years or more. Phelan was a Greek visitor to ancient Provence, Cadell a native man. Ysabel was the chieftain's daughter who, promised to marry the man to whom she gave a ceremonial cup of wine, chose the foreigner. Over the centuries, the two men have fought over and over again, one killing the other to win Ysabel's love. A significant part of Provence's bloody history has become embroiled in the drama of their undying desire and Ysabel's cruel love.

But Melanie, embodying Ysabel, changes the shape of the drama. Rather than another battle to the death, Ysabel sets the men a different task. This time, they will not fight; they will seek her. She gives them three days to find her hiding place. The first to find her will be allowed to kill the other and take Ysabel this time.

Ned realizes that, in order to save Melanie, he must find Ysabel before either of the two men. The search will force him to embrace his own unsuspected power and endanger those closest to him, even as it brings to light his family's own secrets, secrets that have kept his mother from speaking to her sister for twenty-five years, and his connection to Ysabel's ancient story.

### **Questions:**

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

### **Whose story is told in *Ysabel*?**

*Ysabel* bears the name of a woman, but it is told from the perspective of a teenaged boy. Both choices would generally suggest that the tale belongs, in some way, to one or both of these characters, but the story resists ownership. Ysabel is allowed only a brief moment to speak; although she is the central figure in the ancient, violent drama at the center of the novel's plot, it is clearly not her story in any meaningful way.

Phelan and Cadell explicitly reject any notion that this might be Ned's story. Both men warn Ned several times to stay away from them, to avoid disrupting the story into which Ned and Kate have blundered. That story "is not important for you," Phelan says (p. 33). When Ned insists, questioning the source of his own

newly discovered knowledge, Phelan admits that he doesn't understand how Ned knows the things he does, but adds, "This is still not for you. You have no idea of what . . . you have no *role*" (p. 34). Later, Cadell adds his own warning: "This isn't your story. It's desperately unwise to enter into it" (p. 254). Ned doesn't belong in the narrative these two men, and the woman they both desire, have constructed and reconstructed through the centuries. He can only be an intrusion, an interruption, and a dangerous one — for them as much as for Ned.

Of course, in some ways, Phelan and Cadell are both dead wrong. This is Ned's story in ways they cannot possibly imagine, anymore than Ned can. The revelation, at the end, that he is Ysabel's descendant must mean that one of these men is also an ancestor. Their story — and his relationship with the story and with each of its protagonists — tells him something about who he is, even beyond the eerie power he possesses. And, in acting to rescue Melanie and change the eternal rhythms of the recurring story, in seeking to remake its apparently inevitable ending and renewal, he gives himself a role in it.

From another perspective, though, Phelan is absolutely right. Much as this novel is Ned's story, it is not, in the end, very much *about* Ned. The accidental encounter with Phelan and his unexpected power thrust him into the center of both Phelan and Cadell's story and his own family's unsuspected drama, but he is not the one who sets events in motion. And once things begin to happen, he really has little choice in his own actions. He takes the role he must; he does not choose it. On the cusp of adulthood, he can only dimly begin to understand the passions that drive both stories, the depth of desire or of anger or of fear that drive Phelan and Cadell to pursue each other across the centuries, and his mother and her sister to avoid each other for decades. In the end, the story is about the forces that make Ned who he is.

### **In what ways is this Ned's coming-of-age story?**

At fifteen years old, Ned is a boy on the verge of manhood. As the novel starts, he is taking the first steps toward establishing an identity for himself apart from his parents, even as he can still admit that he needs them sometimes. As his uncle points out, Ned has already begun to shave, that change perhaps sparking the more fundamental change that allows his power to emerge (p. 322).

The events at Entremont on Beltaine push Ned to grow up faster. As they organize to find Melanie, everyone in the group begins to defer to Ned, to his ability to sense Phelan and Cadell and the presence of history. The experience unsettles him; he even finds it "a bit scary" (p. 240). In the end, to save Melanie, he must insist that the adults in his life allow him to climb Mont Sainte-Victoire on his own, in spite of the debilitating headache he experienced on his first journey there, in spite of all the other dangers. It is not a role he is really ready to take on; sometimes, he thinks as he considers the choice he has made, "life was easier when you had people to stop you. Maybe that was something parents were good

for" (p. 365). As he shoulders the responsibility of finding Melanie, he begins to see the world differently, to understand things in a new way. "There were a lot of ideas coming to him these days for the first time" (p. 237), ideas about how and why the adults around him behave the way they do.

But the real end of Ned's childhood has little to do with Phelan and Cadell, or even Melanie. It comes, rather, quietly. The first hint of it occurs as he studies the sculpture of Ysabel in the cloister of Saint-Sauveur:

Ned had a sense of time suddenly, the *weight* of it. He was standing in a garden in the twenty-first century, and he was sharply aware of how far back beyond even a medieval sculpture the history of this ground stretched. Men and women had lived and died here for thousands of years. Getting on with their lives. (p. 30)

That sense of time becomes very personal a few days later, on April 29, the day Ned identifies as "the last day of his childhood" (p. 114). It is a calm day, an outing with his father and the crew to survey the Roman ruins around Arles. At the theater in Arles, Ned catches a glimpse of his father, "moving quickly, talking quickly, stopping to frame a view with his hands, going a few steps over to gauge it elsewhere. He saw that the brown hair was graying more now, though not yet the signature moustache" (p. 130-131). And suddenly, as suddenly as he had in the garden at Saint-Sauveur, Ned realizes that time is passing for his father, too: "One day, Ned understood, that hair *would* be grey, or thinning, or both, and his dad wouldn't be wearing tight blue jeans and moving with such crisp, strong strides. Time would do what it did to people" (p. 131). The effect is to make Ned feel distanced from his father; the same currents of time that brought those unknown men and women of centuries ago close will carry his father away. For Ned, that simple, heartbreaking vision of his father aging, that acute awareness of the movement of time, marks the real end of his childhood.

### **How do the historical and the personal interact in this novel?**

The interaction of the historical and the personal shapes all of Kay's work. The crushing impact history can have on individuals is, perhaps, more obvious, but Kay also explores the way in which personal decisions, small, emotional moments, can remake history. In this respect, although it is not a historical novel, *Ysabel* is no different from his other work.

Ysabel's story, for instance, is based on the founding myth of Marseilles, which says that Gyptis, daughter of King Naan of the Ligure tribe, chose for her husband Protis, a Greek ship captain, by awarding him the ceremonial cup of wine. The result was an alliance between the two peoples and the founding of Massalia as a trading port. Gyptis's personal choice, made out of love if the legend is to be believed, gave the Greeks a foothold in the region and perhaps set the stage for the later Roman conquest.

In Kay's version, that tale drives much of the violence of Provence's history. The bloody slaughter at Pourrières and any number of other sites is attributed to the manipulation of Phelan and Cadell, as they angle for Ysabel's affections. Again and again, the love triangle erupts into the present, with dire consequences for thousands. The story of Protis and Gyptis is both personal and political; as the daughter of a king, Gyptis's choice must have political repercussions that will echo through history. As Kay develops it, those repercussions become literal. The two men fight for Ysabel, again and again, in battles that shape the history of Provence and of Europe. A political history, in this reading, becomes the result of personal passions. These three people "become the story of this world" (p. 261). The story becomes a force of history with intimate personal implications for Ned, who must rescue his friend Melanie and who discovers in the process that he is also a consequence — personal, rather than historical — of Ysabel and Phelan and Cadell's story.

Historical and personal forces also interact in Ned's family life. Personal trauma drives his mother to seek out the dangerous places of the world, Bosnia and Sierra Leone and Darfur. Her estrangement from her sister sends her into the places where history is, in many ways, closest to the surface, most dangerous to the present.

### **What links the two stories in *Ysabel*?**

*Ysabel* is a novel about the working out of stories over time. Two stories play out in this novel, each unreeling side by side, but on radically different timescales. The story of Ysabel and Phelan and Cadell has been replaying itself over centuries; the drama between Meghan Marriner, Ned's mother, and her sister Kim stretches over twenty-five years. The two are obviously connected by Ned, whose inadvertent involvement in the first story brings to a head the events of the second, but they are also connected by other shared attributes.

Both stories center on strong women determined to forge their own paths. In making the choice that sets the cycle in motion, Ysabel displays a strength that will carry her across centuries. Melanie, who occupies both stories, reshapes Ysabel's story by refusing to surrender. Kim and Meghan also make choices that demand much: Kim, to pursue the power she discovers she has, even though it costs her her sister; and Meghan, to offer her assistance in the most dangerous places on earth.

Both stories, too, are about a past that won't go away. Twenty-five years or twenty-five centuries; in the end, the difference is unimportant. The barriers Meghan and her sister have built in twenty-five years of silence are no more easily breached than the mysteries of Ysabel's twenty-five hundred year tale. But neither tale is only about the people who live it. The druid priest tells Ned's father that "the two of them, the man and the woman, must be made to understand that this is not just their story" (p. 269). Indeed, it is also the druid's story and the story

of every person who died in its service, knowingly or not. It is the whole story of Provence's history. Similarly, Kim and Meghan's estrangement is not just about the two of them. It is also about their mother and about Kim's husband Dave, who has been watching over Meghan, and about Ned himself, who shares his aunt's connection to Ysabel's world.

### **What role does setting play in this novel?**

Kay is known for writing his novels "on location"; he went to Tuscany to write *Tigana* and composed *A Song for Arbonne*, about troubadours in 12th-13th-century France, from Provence. Similarly, *Ysabel* was written while he lived in Provence. Kay's return to Provence is perhaps a marker of the truly extraordinary nature of the place. Provence is a region that tends to take hold of the imagination, to inspire dreams of leaving it all behind to rent a quiet farmhouse and soak in the famous Provence sunlight. It is, indeed, a paradise.

But one of the lessons of history, and of this novel, is that paradise "attracts people. For their own reasons," each driven to try to "*make it theirs*" (p. 133). Each of those people leaves an imprint, for better or worse. The layering of those imprints becomes the history, the story, of a place. Provence is one of those places "where the past didn't go away" (p. 291), where history is vividly alive, written into the very landscape. The settings of this novel — the watchtower above the chateau where Ned and his family are staying, the ruins at Entremont, the cemetery at Arles, the battlefield at Pourrières — are all manifestations of that history. Mont Sainte-Victoire is not only a mountain, but also the hulking form that dominates Cézanne's paintings, the site of a battle, and — in the end — the setting for the end of Ysabel's story.

Phelan and Cadell and Ysabel belong to this place. They are, as Cadell says, "the tale for here" (p. 252). Their telling and retelling could happen nowhere else. The tension between Cadell and Phelan has as much to do with place as it does with Ysabel herself. Cadell resents Ysabel's choice because Phelan is, still, a Roman — a stranger. He does not belong to this place as Cadell and Ysabel do (p. 253). And so the tale is reenacted across a string of conquests that shape this place irrevocably. If Provence is not quite a character in this novel, the plot could not unfurl itself anywhere else but here, where Ned is acutely aware of the "past infusing the present . . . , entering, defining it" (p. 300).

### **What are Phelan and Cadell really fighting for?**

Ostensibly, of course, Phelan and Cadell are fighting for Ysabel. In each iteration of their tale, the victor wins the woman. It is an ancient formula. However, deeper motivations also drive their rivalry; together, they represent the opposing forces that have shaped Provence over the centuries.

The men's differences are manifested in their physical appearance. Cadell is blond and blue-eyed, a "very big, broad-shouldered man" with "long, bright hair" (p. 109); Phelan is slender and bald and dark-eyed, moving with a gymnast's grace. Cadell is a born fighter, rippling muscles clearly capable of inflicting great damage on an opponent. Phelan's assets are less obvious; lacking Cadell's obvious physical power, he relies on "[s]peed and poise and effortless intelligence" (p. 301).

For Cadell, Phelan's presence in this place, and Ysabel's acceptance of him, represents a cataclysmic upset of the order of things. "She broke the world, that first time, giving him the cup" (p. 252). Phelan remains a stranger, even two thousand years on, because he brings change, change Cadell cannot accept. In some ways, it is the Celt's inability to accept that change that fuels the eternal struggle between him and Phelan. As he cannot acknowledge that the knife wound Phelan deals him will keep him from taking on his owl shape and flying, he cannot "acknowledge what [has] been done to him, that it could change anything, make him behave differently" (p. 313). He continues to fight for the past, to preserve the world he remembers, in spite of centuries that have reshaped the world almost beyond his ability to recognize it.

Where Cadell's power is rooted in the ways of a world that was old when Phelan first sailed into it, a Greek sea captain seeking new trade partners, Phelan's power lies in his particular "way of knowing the world. Subduing it" (p. 254). Cadell seems to dismiss Phelan's thoughtfulness, referring to him twice as a "philosopher" (pp. 252, 253). For him, it is not important why he and Phelan battle over and over again across the centuries. It is sufficient that they do. As Cadell acknowledges, for Phelan knowledge is a means of conquering a place. Reason is an avenue to power. In short, as Phelan explains, the two men represent "different ideas [of the world], different avenues to power" (p. 315). They fight not just to claim a woman, but to preserve their particular visions of a world that has passed them by.

### **How does time work in this novel?**

*Ysabel* operates on two very different time scales. While Ysabel and Phelan and Cadell have lived out their story over twenty-six centuries, Ned's mother and aunt have given twenty-five years to their feud. It would be easy, as Ned notes, "to think about the endless story they'd stumbled into here and call twenty-five years nothing, a blink. Or you could know that they were a good part of two lifetimes, never to be returned or reclaimed" (p. 287). Twenty-five years of silence can no more be undone than the Roman conquest of Provence; they leave a mark as indelible in the lives of those affected. "There were different ways of measuring what could be called a really long time" (p. 308).

On either scale, time is a palpable force in this novel, the plot shaped by Ysabel's three-day deadline for the men to find her as much as by the weight of centuries.

Ned is continually pushed to move faster, think faster, by the presence of Phelan and Cadell, who have had centuries to know and understand the woman who drives the game. Time leaves its traces, on the faces of Ned's father and aunt and on the sculpture of Ysabel in the cathedral, its barely sketched lines "a rendering of memory itself. Or of what time did to men and women, however much they'd been loved" (p. 36). Ned's awareness of the weight of time, of the inevitability of its passing, will force him to acknowledge the end of his own childhood.

At the very center of the novel, time is linked to desire, the force that pulls the three people together again and again over centuries, shapes their story and makes it the story of Provence. The men, the ones who desire, are more or less the same over the centuries, returning in their own bodies, driven by that desire. At the moment of Melanie's changing into Ysabel, all of the men involved in the Beltaine ceremony turn to her, drawn to her "pulled by centuries. And by love" (p. 165). She is the defining fact of their lives, the force that marks for them the passage of time and promises the future. For to desire something or someone is to fear the future, when that thing will be lost. Ysabel is, as Phelan's sculpture depicts her, "like something lost from the beginning" (p. 29). "You saw Ysabel as you stood before her, heard that voice, and you felt loss *in the moment* because you feared she might leave you. Because you knew she would" (p. 391). Desire is always entwined with the awareness of time.

### **Web References:**

#### **The Gauls in Provence: The Oppidum of Entremont**

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/entremont/en/index2.html>

By closely examining the history and construction of Entremont, this impressively designed website offers an extensive exploration of the Celtic presence in Provence.

#### **Atelier Cézanne: Mont Sainte-Victoire**

[http://www.atelier-cezanne.com/anglais/sainte\\_victoire.htm](http://www.atelier-cezanne.com/anglais/sainte_victoire.htm)

This page from a site celebrating Cézanne's life and work in Aix-en-Provence offers just some of the 44 oil paintings and 43 watercolors Cézanne painted of the mountain he made famous. Other pages in the site offer links to more information about Cézanne and about Provence.

### **Further Reading:**

#### **A. A. Attanasio, *Killing with the Edge of the Moon* (2006)**

Geeky, insecure Chet Hubert wants to take Flannery Lake to the prom. But Flannery, who harbors strange powers of her own, is caught up in her grandmother's dark magic and taken to the Otherworld, from which Chet must rescue her, in an adventure reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

**Keith Donohue, *The Stolen Child* (2006)**

Henry Day is seven when he is kidnapped by hobgoblins and a changeling is left in his place. The rest of the novel narrates in haunting detail each Henry's struggle to come to terms with who he is and who he has become. So much more than a fairy tale, *The Stolen Child* is a touching exploration of a boy's struggle to find himself and to make peace with the boy he might have been.

**Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (2001)**

Released from prison and struggling with grief over his wife's death in a car crash, Shadow Moon falls in with the mysterious Mr. Wednesday. It quickly becomes clear that Mr. Wednesday is much more than he appears; in fact, Shadow's employer is an avatar of Odin the All-Father on a quest to gather up the gods of the old world, brought to America with their immigrant worshipers, and force an epic battle against the gods of the new world — "gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon." Like Ned Marriner, Shadow Moon must face his own beliefs, discover who he truly is, before he can understand his role in the cataclysmic events unfolding around him.

**Elizabeth Hand, *Waking the Moon* (1995)**

Sweeney Cassidy chooses the floridly named University of the Archangels and St. John the Divine in Washington, DC, in part for the shameless Gothicism of the campus. But sinister, secret forces are at work at the university. Sweeney is caught up in a drama beyond her comprehension when she is befriended by the beautiful Angelica and Oliver. Angelica and Oliver are incarnations of the Chosen Ones, whose coupling will awaken the ancient moon goddess, Othiym. Expelled for her role in what the college characterizes as a lurid sexual episode — an episode that results in Angelica's disappearance and Oliver's apparent suicide — Sweeney moves on with her life. Years later, she meets and falls in love with Angelica's son, Dylan. Through Dylan, she discovers that Angelica is cultivating within herself the power of Othiym, becoming the destroyer goddess, and sets out to thwart Angelica and the unimaginable power she wields. Readers of *Ysabel* will appreciate the interweaving of the present with an almost unimaginably ancient past that erupts into our modern world with apocalyptic consequences.

**Peter Mayle, *A Year in Provence* (1991)**

Mayle's bestselling memoir chronicles his own idyllic, frustrating adventure in Provence, after he decides to follow his dream and move to the south of France from bleak London. Month by month, Mayle details all of the ways in which reality collides with the dreamy image; indeed, he has barely settled in when the legendary Mistral winds crack pipes and rip the roof tiles from the farmhouse in which he is living. Nonetheless, Mayle handles the setbacks with humorous grace, offering compelling portraits of his Provençaux neighbors and of Provence itself.

**Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003)**

The sweeping love story of Henry, an involuntary time traveler who is occasionally wrenched abruptly out of the present and dropped into some past or future moment, and Clare, who moves through time in the expected way. The heartbreaking end of their love is foreordained, but that doesn't keep the story from being both touching and uplifting.

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