

Ocean of Grass - The Petrellan Saga – Book One by Gordon A. Long

4 stars

A fascinating tale of a sea-faring society forced to adapt to living on land

For generations the Sea People have lived in an ocean-dwelling theocracy, a hierarchical, ship-bound society ruled by Priest-Captains. Some live on Masterships of luxury and prestige; others on smaller Familyships of fishing, cargo and trade. However, with the rise of the cruel, tyrannical Priest-Admiral, a number of the Familyships have rebelled against the old order and been branded as heretics. After a sea battle in which they are overwhelmed by numbers, the rebels are forced ashore to become refugees. To survive, they salvage all they can of their old life, burn their Familyships, and seek the only remaining freedom available to them: that of the wide-open prairie.

Rendered lame by a wound received in the sea battle, Sarasha, a brave young warrior, scribe, and daughter of the rebels' leader, proves invaluable as her people struggle to come to terms with the profound change in their way of life and attempt to build a land-dwelling society. Representing both the voice of a new generation and a bridge between the young and the old, Sarasha must use all her knowledge, intelligence and skills to help her people navigate this new, dangerous, uncharted territory. Old enemies, victims of the Sea People's past raids, regard them with hostility. And when the Priest-Admiral and his fleet return in pursuit of the rebels, tragedy strikes ...

Ocean of Grass is a well-written, mostly absorbing tale of a profound societal and evolutionary shift. The culture of the Sea People is given depth and resonance by way of holy texts and traditions, and their dealings with former enemies are suspenseful and compelling. What makes the story especially interesting is how the Sea People gradually change as they adapt to living on land, evolving from a society ruled by an elite to a community in which decisions are taken on a collective basis. Each character has his or her own part to play and an important contribution to make. Although the pacing is a little slow at times, the plot eventually gathers way and steers towards an exciting denouement in which the stakes could not be higher.

The novel's shining light is its heroine, Sarasha: a fiercely courageous, extremely clever, and immensely sympathetic protagonist. Refreshingly, she is no disgruntled rebel, but has a wonderful relationship with her parents, is a key advisor to her father and the other captains, and her destiny appears to be not one of romance but of leadership. However, she is also believably flawed, plagued with self-doubt, anger and frustration. Forced to cope with her sudden and seemingly permanent disability, Sarasha's struggle to overcome adversity and adapt to her new circumstances mirrors that of her people. In this story, it is Sarasha who makes the political personal; Sarasha who is the future, wounded but unbowed. A good start to the series and a recommended read.

Arwen Evenstar

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