

SEVENTH STAR PRESS

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Crossing Genres with Lettie Prell's Dragon Ring



I first met Lettie Prell when making my premiere trip to the wonderful DemiCon this past spring, which is located in the beautiful city of Des Moines, Iowa.

Lettie and myself were scheduled on a panel regarding the paranormal, along with author Shirley Damsgard (Aby and Ophelia Mystery Series). I was immediately intrigued by her book *Dragon Ring*

after listening to her talk during the panel, where it was very clear that she was a writer who was not bound by genres. Sharp-witted and energetic, Lettie is a great ambassador for her book. Later, I was able to attend her author's reading session, where she displayed considerable talent in the art of live readings. Needless to say, I was really looking forward to *Dragon Ring* by the time that the weekend was over.

Dragon Ring (Flying Pen Press) is Lettie's first novel, and I found it to be a great example of what small press releases are capable of doing, both in terms of quality and the risks that can be ventured in the small press realm. It is not a book that can be easily classified, and it is intensely original in nature.

It is my feeling that the reading world will be hearing a lot more about Lettie Prell in the future!

-Stephen Zimmer for the Seventh Star Press Blog Site, October 1,

2009

SZ: What is your background as a writer?

LP: Early emergence. I wrote as a kid. When it came to college, I talked myself into majoring in something practical - accounting first, then a switch to public administration - but all my electives were in writing and literature. I hung out with writers. One of my poems was accepted into the campus journal. College ended and so did my writing, until one day, I was walking with a friend in the park, and out of the blue I said, "I'm going to start writing science fiction." Where did those words come from? I had surprised myself a lot more than my friend, who took it all in stride. But I did start writing science fiction, and soon I was getting my stories published, and taking writing workshops whenever I could. It became my passion.

SZ: When did you begin *Dragon Ring*?

LP: Nadine (the protagonist) surfaced in 1992, in a short story that was published in a zine called *The Crystal Tower Intuitive Magazine* of the Midlands. Much later, on one of those days when it's time to start a new story, I thought instead of going to the trouble of making up a whole new character, I'd use one I already had on hand, and chose Nadine. Fifteen Nadine stories later, I let myself admit I was on my way to creating a novel.

SZ: What was your path to being published by Flying Pen Press?

LP: I started going to science fiction conventions to get involved in the sf community and meet people in the business. I became a member of Broad Universe, an organization of women science fiction, fantasy and horror writers. Through that organization I met Carol Hightshoe, who was an editor with a new small press out of Denver that was open to submissions. I sent my query to Carol, she requested first chapters and eventually the full manuscript. *Dragon Ring* became one of six novels Flying Pen published in their second year of existence.

SZ: What brought you to choose Guatemala in particular as one of the settings in *Dragon Ring*?

LP: Latin American story-telling has a well-known tradition of

magic realism, where fantastical things can occur in the ordinary world. I wanted to ground the novel in a setting where Nadine's special abilities would be believable, and part of her cultural background.

SZ: In the book the entire country of Guatemala is one big corporation. Do you see something like this as possible in relation to trends that you recognize in today's world?

LP: What can I say? I minored in economics in college. There are two "what ifs" at play here. One idea comes from the realities of third world exploitation. What if people in those countries could gain control and transform that exploitation into a real economy? The second idea comes from the trend a while back, to run government more like a business. That was the buzz phrase, anyway. There was at least an attempt in some places to transform bureaucracy into a creative entrepreneurial environment so it could innovate, become more efficient and so forth. Granted, in reality those efforts only went so far. Nevertheless, what if government was so much like a business, that it actually becomes one?

SZ: Similarly, do you see an evolution in virtual reality-type technologies becoming applied in ways like those in your book? (especially beyond entertainment applications)

LP: We seem to come out with neat, new uses for technology all the time that we hadn't anticipated. Full sensory virtual reality for statisticians does seem a stretch, however. Mainly I was having fun with the idea. Some years back, I played virtual reality games at the Navy Pier in Chicago with a couple of my colleagues from work. One was the type where we wore helmets and tried to shoot each other with these pathetic little guns that shot pellets that looked like marshmallows in the VR environment. I thought at the time that the technology should be better, so I made it better in *Dragon Ring*.

SZ: One of the bolder elements in *Dragon Ring* is that the mystical/spiritual and the scientific are not mutually exclusive or antagonistic towards each other. How have reactions been to this element of the story, given that many people tend to be staunchly rooted in either one or the other?

LP: Brace yourself. A relative of mine is a fundamentalist Christian, and she told me she enjoyed reading my book. A research colleague of mine has also read Dragon Ring, and he mentioned that the first scene where the mystical reveals itself was the point where the book really grabbed him. So in short, no negative feedback so far. People might not be as polarized on this as one might suspect. Or maybe they're just willing to suspend their opinions for the sake of a good story.

SZ: In both Guatemala and the United States, there is an underlying presence of ancient wisdom reflected in both the Mayan and Native American heritages of some of your main characters, as well as the notion that valuable elements have been lost over time. Do you believe that modern society has forgotten or lost valuable lessons and knowledge from the ancient world, even as we have brought forth technological marvels? Do you think that rediscovery of that knowledge, and the idea of harmonization between the mystical/spiritual and technological, would result in even greater advancements in a scientific sense?

LP: Wow, I can just imagine someone picking up this interview and being surprised we're discussing all this in relation to a science fiction novel! Yet this is one of the reasons I love reading this genre. Sure, one of the themes I hope people get when they read the book is we can't go back to old ways of thinking, but that it's okay not to. We're meant to move forward. Every generation reinterprets the wisdom of the past so that it's relevant to them, and increasingly this process appears to be moving away from organized religion. More people are marking None as their religious preference on the surveys. So the "what if" of the novel explores what if in order to move forward, humanity has to embrace all aspects of what it is to be human, including what it has considered spiritual or mystical? Do I think if we did, that it would result in even greater scientific advancements? That's not a fair question for a fiction writer.

SZ: Without giving away too many spoilers, is there an established scientific basis for the fascinating alternative energy system represented in Dragon Ring, or is it more of a theory of your own?

Lettie: I'm fascinated with stories of science on the edge, where it

gets just a little bit whacky. Nikola Tesla, the inventor of alternating current, was both brilliant and eccentric, so of course he inspired me. Early on, I thought up an alternative energy system, which later I described to an electrical engineer over beers. Good thing because one aspect in particular was laughable, and my acquaintance did not hesitate to tell me so. I was treated to a twenty minute lecture on what we know and don't know about electricity, and what part of my idea was completely off-base. As a result, I modified my system to make it less of a stretch for people who know about such things. It's still a stretch, mind you. But there's only one big leap there now.

SZ: Nadine's path involves very strong elements involving the pursuit and embrace of self-discovery, as well as individual empowerment. Were these principle themes that you set out to accomplish with this character?

LP: In science fiction it's sometimes okay to focus on the speculative idea and write to that level. I chose to go for a strong character in addition to the idea, and explore how her personal journey meshed with the larger events around her.

SZ: *Dragon Ring* is a real crossover book, with elements of hard science fiction, general science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, and even the paranormal. It does not fit neatly into just one category. Has that presented any difficulties with marketing the book or has it proven to be a strength?

LP: What comes to mind is what happened early on. The publisher decided to market *Dragon Ring* as adult science fiction, but then the cover comes out and it looks like young adult fantasy. It was too late to have the cover redone. It made me very nervous for a while, until I noticed quite a few people, adults as well as teens, were perking up when they saw the cover art. I learned how to describe the book in different ways to different people. For men and teen boys, I often emphasize the science element. For women and girls I emphasize the dragon and the female protagonist. Maybe that's stereotyping, but the book is selling to a wide range of age groups, and both sexes. I've done lots readings now for mixed audiences, and it's generally well-received.

SZ: What do you see as the most difficult or frustrating aspects

about the small press world?

LP: We often have to be proactive and persistent to get our books into bookstores. Just because one Barnes and Noble carries my book, doesn't mean all of them will. There is still some misconception that small presses are akin to vanity presses. It's a ridiculous notion, but it still lurks out there.

SZ: Conversely, what do you see as the strengths and benefits of being on a small press?

LP: Small presses have a reputation for treating their authors very well, and that has been true of my relationship with Flying Pen Press. I can actually phone my publisher and talk to him when I need to.

SZ: What are you working on right now?

LP: My second novel, of course. This one is not the sequel to *Dragon Ring*, although I assure my readers that sequel has been started. The second novel is science fiction, but something completely different. I've also been taking some breaks from the novel to write short stories.

SZ: Where can folks find more information about you, your work, and where to buy your books?

LP: My website www.lettieprell.com has links to some reviews and interviews, and where I'll be next. I urge people to walk into their favorite bookstore and order my book. Any bookstore can order it, and you'd be showing support for your local bookstore in the process. *Dragon Ring* is also available on Amazon, so it's easy to get if you want to go that route.

Dragon Ring, a Visionary Novel that Encompasses Several Genres Successfully

-review by Stephen Zimmer for Seventh Star Press Blog Site, October 1, 2009



Dragon Ring (Flying Pen Press, ISBN: 978-0-9795889-6-9) is that rare sort

of novel that not only crosses genres, but does it quite well.

The first novel from Iowa-based author Lettie Prell, *Dragon Ring* tells the fascinating story of a young Guatemalan woman named Nadine who has a transcendent experience while partaking in a virtual reality game.

The setting of the story is the near future, laying out an intriguing vision where Guatemala has essentially become one large corporation in order to rid itself of corruption. Nadine's father was highly involved with the development of the new Guatemala, before he left to participate in a United States-based corporation that is involved with some momentous and visionary research with energy systems. When Nadine learns that he was killed suddenly in a plane crash, she sets out for the United States on a journey that takes her to the roots of mystical elements that she was skeptical about, as well as the circumstances concerning her father.

The writing paces quickly, while having enough description and exposition to satisfy the reader's curiosity. The plot and story are kept tight, such that there are no loose ends hanging by the end of the adventure.

Dragon Ring takes a great risk in that it involves both hard science fiction as well as the mystical, two things that are not often comfortable neighbors in literature or other forms of entertainment. Both are essential elements of the plot, and neither is positioned as innately superior to the other. Lettie is to be commended for this approach. This refreshing harmony of the two is rarely seen in realms where the subjects of science and the spiritual are often polarized, or one is propped up at the expense of the other.

Aztec and Native American mysticism flow into the plot, right alongside an amazing plot element involving energy systems. I can't say too much because I don't want to unleash big spoilers, but suffice it to say that Lettie may be onto something big here! Lettie also portrays some very interesting concepts regarding the future applications of virtual reality technology, in both entertainment and non-entertainment arenas.

There are many very captivating characters that emerge along the

way, from the spiritual Juan Carlos (who almost plays out like a wizard-mentor to Nadine as the heroine in this story), to Three Crows, a young Native American man who factors into Nadine's profound VR experience, to Norman Lee, a brilliant scientist who turned out to be one of my favorite characters in the book. They are all very alive and vibrant, and Lettie did an excellent job at developing a supporting cast for a main character that is strong and captivating enough to sustain the leading role effectively.

This book will resonate with fantasy fans, science fiction fans, and even readers who are not normally into speculative fiction. The pacing, plot twists, sense of mystery and intrigue present in *Dragon Ring* is just as potent as any thriller/adventure type novel. All of it races towards a very powerful conclusion, which results in one of the biggest revelations of the entire novel.

My only regret is that this wonderful reading experience was over too soon! I wish that *Dragon Ring* was a five-hundred page book, and that another installment was on the horizon. *Dragon Ring* is simply that clever, visionary, and compelling. Take a chance on *Dragon Ring* and you will discover a very special book indeed!

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