



## Swordspoint

*Ellen Kushner*

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## **Swordspoint** Ellen Kushner

The classic forerunner to **The Fall of the Kings** now with three bonus stories.

Hailed by critics as "a bravura performance" (*Locus*) and "witty, sharp-eyed, [and] full of interesting people" (*Newsday*), this classic melodrama of manners, filled with remarkable plot twists and unexpected humor, takes fantasy to an unprecedented level of elegant writing and scintillating wit. Award-winning author Ellen Kushner has created a world of unforgettable characters whose political ambitions, passionate love affairs, and age-old rivalries collide with deadly results.

## **Swordspoint**

On the treacherous streets of Riverside, a man lives and dies by the sword. Even the nobles on the Hill turn to duels to settle their disputes. Within this elite, dangerous world, Richard St. Vier is the undisputed master, as skilled as he is ruthless--until a death by the sword is met with outrage instead of awe, and the city discovers that the line between hero and villain can be altered in the blink of an eye.

## **Swordspoint Details**

Date : Published February 2003 by Spectra (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780553585490

Author : Ellen Kushner

Format : Paperback 329 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Lgbt, Romance, M M Romance, Glbt, Queer

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## From Reader Review Swordspoint for online ebook

### Kat Hooper says

Originally posted at FanLit. <http://www.fantasyliterature.com/reviews/swordspoint-a-melodrama-of-manners-by-ellen-kushner/>...

Set in a fictional Georgian-era-type society, *Swordspoint: A Melodrama of Manners* is a "fantasy of manners" or "mannerpunk" novel. In contrast to epic fantasy, where the characters are fighting with swords and the fate of the universe is often at stake, manerpunk novels are usually set in a hierarchical class-based society where the characters battle with words and wit. There may or may not be magic or sorcery involved and, in many ways, this subgenre of fantasy literature is more like historical fiction that takes place in an imaginary universe. The focus is on societal structures and social commentary. Characters may not be changing THE world, but they're changing THEIR world. If you like Jane Austen and P.G. Wodehouse, manerpunk may be just your thing.

In *Swordspoint*, the infamous swordsman Richard St. Vier is a tool of the upper class. Those who can afford his exorbitant rates may hire him to challenge a lover who's spurned them, kill off a rival, or just make a party more exciting. Perhaps Richard wouldn't have taken that last assignment if he'd known how the nobles were scheming before the next election. Now he's been dragged into their business, and it's quite a quagmire. On top of that, he has to deal with the eccentricities of his lover Alec, a university dropout. Meanwhile, playboy Michael Godwin is pursuing the widowed duchess, trying to evade the amorous intentions of an important councilman, and secretly pursuing his desire to be a swordsman like Richard St. Vier.

*Swordspoint* is somewhat original considering that it's one of the first "mannerpunk" fantasies and features several bisexual characters (unusual for a book published in 1987). The book is highly recommended by Neil Gaiman and is part of his new *Neil Gaiman Presents* audiobook collection. For this reason, I guess, I was expecting more.

The story is diverting -- a nice enough way to spend a few hours -- but that's really about all I can say. All of the characters are unlikable, nastily plotting and scheming against each other, abusing each other, or being abused. Richard St. Vier could have been a great character, but his love for Alec was incomprehensible. Alec is boring, sullen, selfish, possibly crazy, and completely without any noticeable value other than his good looks. Why is Richard willing to kill anyone who messes with Alec, a man who's always trying to provoke situations in which Richard will be forced to fight a duel? Not a convincing love affair. I also didn't think that *Swordspoint*, supposedly a comedy of manners, which relies on witty and clever dialogue, was particularly witty or clever. The plot, though diverting, was not exciting or clever either.

In its favor, the book is well-written, with smooth prose and excellent pacing. I really liked Riverside, the low-class area where Richard lives. The storyline in which Michael Godwin leads Lord Horn on, changes his mind, and then tries to evade Horn's advances, is funny. I was just expecting more.

The audiobook version is narrated by Ellen Kushner herself (who you know, if you've heard her on NPR, has a nice voice) with the addition of a "full cast" who reads some of the dialogue some of the time (sometimes Kushner reads the dialogue). Kushner's tone is light and breezy and better with the narration than the dialogue. When she reads the dialogue, her breeziness and lack of variation in tone doesn't help her characters' personalities. However, the actors who occasionally do the dialogue (Dion Graham, Katherine Kellgren, Robert Faas, Nick Sullivan, and Simon Jones) are excellent. The sound effects that are occasionally added to the background are atrocious. For example, when the nobles are drinking tea from fine

china cups and saucers, it sounds like they're in a downtown diner. Fires crackling and clocks ticking disturb the narration. It's ludicrous, but fortunately the sound effects are infrequent.

I'm eager to try one of Ellen Kushner's other mannerpunk novels. *Swordspoint: A Melodrama of Manners* was just okay, but I like *Riverside* and plan to try the sequel, *The Privilege of the Sword*, which takes place years later and features a female protagonist. It's also available from Neil Gaiman Presents and I've already purchased it. I'll let you know.

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### **Josh says**

Gorgeous and memorable book. There's not a lot that I can add that hasn't been said. I read it about the time I was discovering LGBTQ characters in spec fiction, and I remember wishing that everything could be like this.

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### **Lau says**

Nunca más le hago caso a una recomendación de George R.R. Martin.

Esta es la historia de Richard de Vier, una suerte de mercenario que trabaja de batirse a duelo con espadas en nombre de la persona que lo contrata. No tiene escrúpulos en matar a su contrincante si la situación lo amerita, y suele ser contratado por los nobles que viven en la Colina, la parte de la ciudad donde la ley aún existe... bastante.

El libro irá alternando la historia de Richard con las historias de varios nobles, en una curiosa sucesión de eventos sin la menor importancia, diálogos intrascendentes y algo que me gustaría comenzar a llamar *burocracia literaria*... que no es otra cosa sino alargar eternamente el momento de que –por favor– ocurra algo que mueva la historia.

Comienza bien, eso no lo puedo negar. Está escrito de forma poética, el primer capítulo es lindo y ya desde el principio deja ver con mucha naturalidad que el protagonista parece estar en pareja con otro hombre.

Richard y Alec viven juntos en un sector marginal de la ciudad, conocido como La Ribera. Allí a la gente le encanta presenciar duelos y ver correr sangre, y Richard mata con una facilidad pasmosa así que les da un show bastante seguido. Que Alec parezca tener por hobby provocar a la gente para que Richard tenga que batirse (y en lo posible a muerte) colabora bastante con eso. También colabora a que Alec caiga considerablemente mal, sumado a que es desagradable, egoísta, soberbio y morboso.

Richard no es ninguna joya tampoco, la verdad que entre los dos no se hace uno.

Sin embargo, la relación entre ambos no me terminó de quedar clara durante buena parte del libro, ya que la misma autora muchas veces nombra a Alec como "el amigo" de Richard, y muy pocas veces como "el amante". Cuando finalmente se esclareció, me di cuenta de que la relación que tienen es horrible. Quizás porque ellos son horribles. Son de esos personajes que lisa y llanamente, caen mal.

Por otro lado tenemos a los nobles que viven en La Colina. Éste es un mundo muy muy muy rococó, sus habitantes son todos viciosos, egoístas y desagradables... y tienen un sistema político que durante la mayor parte del libro me resultó más confuso e inentendible que otra cosa. Sólo me quedaba claro que había mucha gente intentando conseguir más poder a base de hacer rodar cabezas... literalmente.

Pero lo que realmente harán todo estos nobles, además de confundirme sobre quién es realmente el

protagonista de la historia de tanto que aparecen, será hablar. Y acostarse entre ellos (o tratar de). Y comer.

Al comienzo del libro hay una pelea interesante... y va a ser una de las pocos que vamos a ver. Para la novela llamarse **A punta de espada**, hay una curiosa falta de duelos.

Lo que si hay, y muchísimo, es diálogos. Diálogos que no dirán absolutamente nada, que alargarán los momentos hasta el límite de lo alargable, y que contribuirán de forma muy eficaz a que uno se maree y no entienda gran cosa de lo que está ocurriendo. Eso cuando de hecho está ocurriendo algo.

Noté con horror que en esos pocos momentos en que realmente se cuenta algo importante, ocurre a tal velocidad (máximo tres párrafos) que a veces uno pasa de largo y tiene que releer.

Antes de tomar una decisión sobre algo (que produzca una mínima acción) lo piensan, y lo hablan, y lo siguen pensando, y se van de tema... y se dan una semana para responder... y luego se ponen a *especular* con cómo la otra persona puede llegar a reaccionar, y a hacerse toda una película de cosas que al final son sólo imaginación de los personajes... y entonces siguen conversando de cosas que luego no aportan nada a la historia, y siguen hablando... Y en la práctica no ocurre nada. Nada. Creo que si tuviera que marcar los eventos ¿importantes? de la historia, no serían más de diez.

Pasado el 25% del libro aún no había ocurrido nada digno de mención. En el capítulo 12, más o menos el 35% del libro, la historia empieza a mejorar, y hay de hecho ciertas partes que son buenas y/o entretenidas. Pero no duran.

Ese estilo poético que me gustaba al principio muy pronto se vuelve una molestia. Se interrumpe la no-historia para hacer descripciones y más descripciones (y seguir especulando y exteriorizando los pensamientos de los personajes) y la historia OH POR DIOS NO AVANZA.

Además, a la autora le encanta usar el curioso adjetivo 'cremoso', y lo usa para describir cosas que jamás hubiera imaginado como *cremosas*. Sí podríamos decir que su forma de escribir es... cremosa. Además de peligrosamente recargada.

Estaba desesperada por terminarlo, un sentimiento que no debería inspirar ninguna novela.

Y entonces se termina de golpe.

Mi edición ~~por desgracia~~ tenía dos historias más, la primera de ellas bastante inconexa, y la otra un intento de deprimirnos con lo que se podría llamar un golpe bajo.

Este es un libro que se vende como fantasía, así que mientras iba leyendo y avanzando, aburriéndome y deseando que *por favor* ocurriera algo, todo lo que podía pensar "¿y la fantasía cuándo llega?". La respuesta es simple: nunca. Lo único que tiene de fantasioso es que la historia está ambientada en una ciudad inexistente (así que queda descartado 'ficción histórica'), donde las leyes son muy laxas y la mayor parte de la población parece ser abiertamente bisexual. Hasta los nombres de los personajes son comunes y corrientes. No hay magia, no hay dragones, no hay ni siquiera una curandera que trate los callos plantales con pasto masticado.

Me acordé *mucho* de George R.R. Martin mientras lo leía. Nunca más le hago caso. Nunca. Más.

*Reseña de Fantasía Mágica*

Buddy Read en Emma's Tea Party

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**Siria says**

I picked this up for a couple of euro in one of my favourite second-hand bookshops because I'd heard it recommended numerous times on my flist. Cheesy fantasy novel cover aside (as a side note, exactly why must the covers of 99% of fantasy books be so fantastically appalling?), the descriptions I'd heard of it made it seem as if the book was tailor-made to appeal to me. A well-written, slashy, historical fantasy-of-manners - what's not to like?

Well, quite a lot, as it turns out. If the blurb by Neil Gaiman on the back cover is true - that this was the best fantasy novel of 1988 - then the fantasy novels published in 1988 weren't all that much to write home about, I think.

This is not to say that *Swordspoint* is badly written. It's not. It's quite competently written, in fact; but that's all. There were a couple of nicely written passages, but I never really got the impression that Kushner rose above the average throughout the book. It's also probably an indication more of how much fanfic I read than how prevalent it actually was, but I was also really irked by how often (it seemed) she talked about characters' eye colours, and how much she used epithets. I am perfectly aware that they can come in useful when dealing with two characters who are the same sex; but constantly referring to Richard as 'the swordsman' does tend to wear after a while.

However, my main issue with the book was the fact that it came across as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*-by-numbers. There are attempts at witty, subtle, layered dialogue; treacherous, unscrupulous, amoral characters; hot sex. In fact, Kushner tries to include almost everything that makes *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* such a delicious pleasure to read. She lacks the finesse in combining everything which made Choderlos de Laclos' book work, though.

Richard and Alec are, for the most part, boringly flat. For a potentially lethal swordsman who has no qualms about killing, Richard is remarkably unmenacing, while for an unstable aristocrat, Alec is remarkably boring. The plot is very see through, and Kushner seems to have a thing for twisting the characters to fit the plot, rather than letting the character's development affect the story. For instance, I am really, really unable to see any reason why Alec and Richard are together and stay together other than for the necessities of the plot. The rapier-sharp dialogue which I'm sure Kushner was aiming for was also a much blunter sword than the author would wish, I think. A lot of the time, it had the laborious feel of someone who sat around a lot coming up with witty epigrams to come up with at a moment's notice - much more Mr Collins than Elizabeth Bennet, I'm afraid.

I'm also pretty certain that, were the Marquise de Merteuil and the Duchess Tremontaine ever to meet, the Marquise would be able to rip the Duchess to shreds without exerting herself one little bit.

I'm not not recommending this book - a lot of people whose reading tastes normally gel with mine really seem to love it - but it left me cold.

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### **The FountainPenDiva, Old school geek chick and lover of teddy bears says**

Ellen Kushner's first novel sets the standard for what a polite fantasy of manners and romance should be. Like Jane Austen, Ms. Kushner's language sparkles with wit and verve. She creates a world both familiar and yet not like anyplace we've ever been and inhabits it with characters who cease to be imaginary. Like Rafael Sabatini, the swordfight scenes keep one on the edge of their seat, though are elegantly restrained yet sharply honed.

Richard St. Vier is as dashing and gallant as Basil Rathbone and Errol Flynn, and as just complex. He kills for hire, yet has a poetic soul and a certain code of honor, which includes not taking commissions in which children or women are to be harmed. His companion, the mysterious Alec - once a student at University, now 'slumming' on the other side of the river, has a definite taste for danger though he can barely handle himself. He's wry, sarcastic and perhaps a little unhinged. The alluring Diane, Duchess of Tramontaine is one of literature's cleverest femme fatales, and I would love to see an entire novel written about her. She comes off as completely uninterested in anything outside of her little social milieu, a facade that fools nearly everyone around her.

I'm a little appalled that some critics of the book make much of the novel's take on homosexuality, to the point that they did not enjoy such a well-crafted tale. I think these readers forget this is not a social treatise, but a work of fantasy fiction and as such, Ms. Kushner doesn't have to deeply examine the whys and wherefores of her imagined society's tolerance. To be honest, I found Ms. Kushner's treatment of the fluid sexuality of her characters to be passionate yet tasteful. She doesn't write erotica, but allows the reader to imagine the power of the various couplings. Bottom line - good fantasy fiction allows us to immerse ourselves in places and times not our own, and if one brings their silly baggage and hangups with them, they do a great disservice to the writer...and to themselves.

My only issue with 'Swordspoint'...it was far too SHORT. I fell in love with Riverside and its inhabitants and shed a tear when I had to leave. The true sign of a book that will remain dog-eared and much-beloved.

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### **Sarah says**

4.5 Stars.

This book was a whole lot of fun! Humor and swordplay and romance all rolled into one. I'm usually not a big fan of the Fantasy of Manners subgenre but this one was very close to absolute perfection.

I listened to the multi-cast audio with the "illuminated" bits, which were basically sound effects every now and then. If people were running you would hear footsteps, there was sound for sword play, the babble of voices in a crowded area, doors creaking open, and a few other things. It really just added a bit of fun to what was already a very fun book. I also found out that the next two in the series are done the same way so I'll definitely continue the series.

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### **Joseph says**

I read this book first many years ago  
Seduced by Cantly's gorgeous cover or  
Reviews in Locus, honestly, I don't  
Recall or think it matters at this point.  
The point is: You should buy and read this book.  
St Vier and Alec, star-crossed lovers, if  
The stars were feeling just a bit perverse:  
St Vier the swordsman, best in Riverside

And Alec, clad in ragged student's robes  
(but is his past mysterious? of course)  
Are caught in nobles' intrigues labyrinthine  
(for swordsmen are to nobles but a tool,  
used as honor dictates, or at need)  
But tools, if held too tightly, sometimes slip  
And cut with unintended consequence.  
The point will find the heart if thrust just so,  
And blood like claret stain new-fallen snow.

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## Wol says

The full Tome & Tankard Review and Custom Cocktail is available [here](#).

This one is a bit special for me, as it turns out I've been a fan of Ellen Kushner for far longer than I realized. Thinking to myself "this name sounds awfully familiar" when Ellen tweeted me about *Swordspoint*, I looked her up only to find that I've been reading her *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels since I was about 8 years old – crikey! Turns out that those very CYOA novels were written in order to pay the rent when she was writing *Swordspoint*, and here, almost 30 years later, I've found my way back to her work. ❤

And *Swordspoint* is very much my cup of tea! It's a witty, irony-laden good time that reads as if *Dangerous Liaisons* had been written by Jane Austen. I love Fantasy of Manners as a subgenre, and as far as I know, this is one of the earliest examples (I understand Kushner coined the term, even). There are debonair sword fighters, ruthless aristocrats and subterfuge galore. All this set in a fictional society known as Riverside, which is not unlike 18th Century England. I absolutely adore political intrigue so for me this scratched a lot of the right itches, however it's low on action and it's an extremely feminine novel so this isn't going to work for everyone. If you're looking for Grimdark, turn on your heel and look elsewhere. Those who aren't fans of the classics might find the pacing and the lack of fantasy elements difficult to get to grips with. Indeed, it's an outside-the-box sort of fantasy novel in that there is no magic, no fantastic creatures – very little that people have come to expect from this genre. However, the fictional setting and culture kept me gripped, along with some beautifully evocative prose. I found myself reminded of Jane Austen's own description of *Pride & Prejudice*: "light and bright and sparkling".

I listened to the audiobook for much of the novel and I would highly recommend going this route – Kushner herself provides the narration, with a voice cast, music, and special effects. It's absolutely sublime, for me everything clicked wonderfully and added to the atmosphere without being intrusive, though your mileage may vary as I have spoken to at least one person who found it distracting. The voice actors are excellent and the amusement in Kushner's voice sets the tone perfectly.

The plot, while not action packed (though there are some excellent swordfights), provides plenty of twists due to the cunning schemes of its characters, leading to a climactic courtroom scene that put me in mind of *The Merchant of Venice* with its sheer cleverness. There's romance, a femme fatale for the ages, and a fluid and delicious approach to sexuality that is far ahead of its time given that the novel was published in '87. It is a book that will no doubt be divisive for some, but for me it was a joy. I'm thrilled to have been reunited with this author, and I'll be picking up the rest of this series for sure.

**Score: 8.8/10**

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

I read very little of this book. While it is well written (I say this in respect to those who like it greatly) it is not a book I care to get involved in. The world while well crafted is one that creeps toward debauchery and cynicism on an almost monumental scale. There are actually (so far as I can see) no "heroes" here, very little that is redeeming. Its claim to fame is a drama in a world of those who see themselves as sly sophisticates.

Please enjoy it if it's to your taste as fiction.. It isn't mine and I choose not to put my time into it.

I'm going to update this as my review has "raised some eyebrows".

In detail then, I couldn't get into the book. When I said I realized it was "well written" I said this as I saw the world building as being clear if not detailed and I could tell that the characters were at least clearly seen by the writer. On the other hand FOR ME...That's FOR ME they don't translate well. Their dialogue didn't seem natural and frankly I just couldn't care about anyone in the book. It never drew me in and I skimmed and skipped. I just wasn't into the book and didn't care about the characters or the story.

For me it was a waste of my limited reading time to forge through it. There are thousands of books waiting.

I know some really like this book. It's true of most any book that some will love it and some will hate it and some will be in the middle. To say a book is "good" or "bad" is in truth subjective. I can't think of a thing I like by Steinbeck. Does that mean that Steinbeck isn't a "good writer"? That's absurd. Many, many people love his work, I find it depressing and even painful. The fact that he translates that pain to paper so well simply depresses some of us more.

So...FOR ME repeat FOR ME this book is a one star experience, a waste of time that doesn't draw my interest. If you like it great, enjoy. It's a matter of taste.

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### **D says**

I do not like fantasy books at all--particularly those that deal with magic and monsters and the like. I was initially skeptical of how well I would like this book since it is in the fantasy genre, but very quickly I found that I could not put this book down. I have recently re-read it and found it to still be high on my list of favorite books.

What did it for me was that this book was not about the things one usually thinks of upon hearing the word "fantasy." There was no magic or mythical creatures or anything of that sort--just a story about a highly regarded swordsman trying to survive the cutthroat world of the elite who use his skills for their personal gains. In the greater scheme of things, both Richard and Alec seemed to be pawns part of a much bigger plot that does not finally reveal its intentions until the later chapters.

Character development could have been improved in certain areas, but was sufficient for understanding the

plot. What lacked, in my opinion, was the relationship between Richard and Alec. There did not seem to be any strong emotional tie that bound these two together other than maybe for the sake of convenience--Alec liked to cause trouble and Richard kept him alive when the inevitable fights broke out.

Regardless, I took the book for what it was and thoroughly enjoyed it.

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### **Miss says**

Hahahahaha wow. Man I don't even know what to say about this. Okay basic run down: this book's got two primary narrators: Richard St. Vier and Michael Godwin. Everyone wants a piece of St. Vier because he's the most badass swordsman ever to exist and apparently stabbing people is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts in this world so long as you outsource the job. Michael Godwin is a doof with a talent for ruining his own life. Lucky for him he is rich good looking doof who catches the eye of one of the book's power players and consequently retains both his life and a purpose. Good things comes to those who are privileged?

Yeah so let's talk about St. Vier. I was pretty down with this guy. Swordfighting, competence, not a huge talker, all good things in my book. This affinity lasted for about as long as it took me to catch on to the fact that Richard St. Vier is a psychopath.

Maybe you're shaking your head at me right now, like girl he kills people for a living, you're surprised that his moral compass isn't properly functioning? To which I say shut up okay, fantasy is chock full of morally ambivalent swordsmen who lean towards good, how was I to know? Everything was proceeding normally, people were doing the usual ooh Mr. St. Vier routine and then this friend of his is like (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Richard St. Vier, ladies and gentlemen. Quiet. Good with a sword. Terrifyingly out of his gourd.

His boyfriend doesn't get much POV so let's just say he's an enabler who I never got very attached to. Tbh, I don't know why Richard was either.

Michael's narrative on the other hand skates its way between hilarious and alienating. I'm pretty sure I don't like the guy? But occasionally I'll waver when I spend a half minute laughing over a scene where he literally just looks at himself in the mirror and considers how amazingly hot he is, like if that guy in the mirror was a stranger he'd definitely hit it.

Other highlights of his story include the time he made out with his mom's friend because he found out the married woman he was having an affair with was using him to get pregnant. How dare you Olivia! Does this mean I could have been just any man? At least Horn wants me for my body!

(This is promptly followed by him noticing he's old and retreating in horror. Yet further proof of the injustice he's been dealt:

Olivia had thrust him into the arms of this revolting stranger

)

Oh Michael. All these people around you just *forcing* you into poor choices. You're a good looking member of the aristocracy, they expect you to take responsibility for your actions too?

You can really tell Kushner improved between writing this and *The Privilege of the Sword*. Katherine was interesting and likeable and the text capable of correctly identifying her flaws. *Swordspoint* has the same competent plotting and open minded view to sexuality but it's difficult to appreciate when you're busy trying to work out if the author's aware she's written a book where at least two of the 'heroic' characters are psychopaths. 3 stars

(You could argue that *Swordspoint* is meant to have no heroes and the cast is deliberately all signalled as amoral but I'd like to point out that the Duchess, a character Kushner spends a great deal of time informing us one of the most intelligent and observant people in the novel, says that Alec's big problem is he's an idealist who believes in equality. I have to wonder where that sense of justice expressed itself all those times he deliberately provoked people so Richard would kill them for him but okay. Maybe idealism means something different in the Riverside! Or maybe this book does not have a handle on its characters and is trying to maintain a heroes vs. villains narrative while simultaneously glorying in a dark fantasy aesthetic that leaves it feeling like a confused contradictory mess. )

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### **Nikki says**

Back when I first read *Swordspoint*, I wasn't totally won over. Something about the sting in the romance really didn't work for me — I wanted Alec and Richard to be a lot easier to categorise, their love to have less sharp edges. But going into it for this reread knowing that's the way it is, I actually enjoyed it all quite a lot: the back and forth of banter, the trading of barbs, the politicking and, yeah, the bond between Richard and Alec, and what it will drive them both to. *Swordspoint* does have sharp edges, and the love story is not as saccharine as some might wish (including teenage Bibliophibians), but in reality it works really well.

Perhaps it's best not to think too much about how sustainable the political system described would be, with the use of swordsmen to outsource arguments. I just enjoyed *Swordspoint* for the melodrama of manners that it is, and thrilled along with Alec to Richard's skill and ferocity as a swordsman.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

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### **Nikki says**

Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* is a very light and easy to read fantasy novel. The book is set in an unnamed city, in a world rather different to ours. The main character, Richard, is a swordsman, who earns his living by killing nobles by contract. This is basically done as a way to get around blood being on a noble's hands. The other main character, Alec, is mysterious and very, very messed up. Despite the fact that the cover doesn't breathe a word of it, Richard and Alec are lovers.

On one level, I really enjoyed *Swordspoint*. It's easy to read, the prose is clear and precise, and everything ticks along at a nice pace. The alternate world is built up with ease, and the dialogue flows along smoothly, if perhaps not as memorably as the author intends.

I did have quibbles about it, though. It slid by so smoothly that it didn't really get any hooks into me, and I didn't really care all that much about the characters. I love reading romance involving two men, but Alec and Richard didn't really convince me. Alec was strange and melodramatic and unreasonable, and I couldn't fathom Richard's attraction to him -- or what Alec really saw in Richard in return. In my copy of *Swordspoint*, there are three short stories from their world, and it's in "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" and "The Death of the Duke" that I really felt engaged with their relationship -- a brief humorous exchange about how Alec loves Richard only for his sword (hawhaw) and the story of Alec's death. Mostly in the latter. I suspect they might grow on me on a second reading, but I spent a lot of time wondering why they were together. Alec's backstory didn't really satisfy me, either.

Definitely fun, and I'll probably keep it around, but not quite what I'd been hoping, I guess. I have the other books set in this world, and it'll be interesting to see who shows up for a second round, and whether I feel less ambivalent about them.

Edit: I can confirm that on a reread, I liked *Swordspoint* rather more, because I already knew and loved the characters.

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### **[Name Redacted] says**

Tiresome. Tedious. Repetitive. Populated with interchangeable, unlikable cardboard cut-out characters. The dialogue is endlessly crammed with discussions of fashion and parties and clothes and status-seeking. The action sequences either occur off-stage or crawl by at a snail's pace, and despite its name there's next to no sword-fighting in the actual narrative.

I have no idea how this became considered a "new classic" nor even how it managed to become identified as "fantasy." It's more like an alternate-history novel, set in a world devoid of the supernatural and which is a sort of melange of Renaissance France, Italy and perhaps Enlightenment Vienna. Guy Gavriel Kay does something similar, but in his novels the differences are substantial enough, and the supernatural apparent enough, to justify being identified as part of the "fantasy" genre. In Kushner's setting, the culture, the religion, the languages, etc. all seem like little more than vague and amateurish attempts at re-creating actual historical features.

The only "fantasy" elements about it are A) the way in which all the men sound and behave like women, and B) the fact that every man in this fictional world is less than a meaningful glance away from a homosexual romp (and naturally, none of the women seem similarly inclined to lesbianism). Ultimately, this read exactly like the sort of Harry Potter slash-fics my female friends used to write, in which Dumbledore and Snape and Harry and Draco and James and Sirius couldn't keep their hands off one another, yet somehow the female characters never seemed to engage in anything other than frustrated flirtations with their disinterested male counterparts. It feels like the rankest sort of stereotypical hyper-female wish-fulfillment, and the fact that the author is a woman at once does not surprise me and confounds me utterly.

So no, I was not a fan. And I suspect its "classic" status has more to do with the fact that it was one of the first "fantasy" novels to deal with homosexuality (cartoonish and adolescent though its approach might be) in

an open, encouraging and frank manner, than any sort of value the book itself might contain. Indeed, THAT is the only sort of "swordplay" this book truly contains.

PS: I deeply regret buying both this book and its sequel. I have learned a valuable lesson about believing a book's hype.

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### **Sean says**

I read this book years ago when I was an impressionable Mormon closet case, and I remember being intrigued and disturbed at the time by Kushner's depiction of lust, bisexuality and homosexual relationships. When I reread it today I rediscovered its brilliance, intricacy and poignancy. The relationship between the swordsman St Vier and "his young gentleman, the University student" had a glittering, frenzied, self-destructive beauty I associate with Matt Damon's Mr. Ripley, while finding an eventual redemption the latter continually refused. St Vier, simple, balanced and pragmatic, is bewildered and sometimes terrified by Alec's tendency towards violence and self-hatred, but loves him nonetheless, going to great lengths to preserve his safety, his life and his honor. In the end, their love is shown to be the only real thing in the entire novel, as relationships and power structures are cynically undermined and manipulated at every turn.

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### **Lulu says**

It's hard to be happy about the fact you spent a day vomiting your guts up. But, when, a couple of days later, being too ill still to leave the house allows you to stay home and listen to the audiobook instead of going to see a show, it certainly makes you a little more grateful for sickness. That's how much I enjoyed this.

I can only describe this book as being a total delight. For someone who isn't a fan of Austen, a fantasy of manners is often hit-and-miss for me. This was all hits. The characters were charming, full of bravado and secrets and gossip. They came fully voiced - both metaphorically in Ellen's writing, and literally in the full-cast audiobook - and incredibly vibrant. How can anyone not love the rakish and studious Alec who slums it in the dodgy town of Riverside, and, more importantly, his companion, the honourable Richard St. Vier, a swordsman who has a great capacity for love, and little patience for politics.

The cast of nobles on the Hill is too numerous to distill in a review, but every one leaves a lasting impression - even Lord Carlie who has fled the imaginary city before the book begins.

Acts from the very first page build up into the crescendo of the final act, slowly and satisfactorily. That's always the best thing about a fantasy of manners, is that slow burn of a plot where everything has importance and intrigue much beyond a singular character's ken is afoot.

Oh, and my personal favourite thing is noblemen and women and the upper class speak in constant double meaning and double entendre. While I felt sometimes Kushner's dialogue left a little to be desired, it was made up for by how much I was rooting for the characters in each sparring match.

I'll say again: seriously delightful. I'm both grateful for a somewhat-standalone (since to my knowledge, the series is more of an anthology series than a true sequel-prequel deal) in a world of constant trilogies and series, but also upset that I won't be following these characters anymore - particularly St. Vier and Alec.

While I was first hesitant of "ambient" audiobook, with sound effects and ambient sounds, once you're past the first, crowded chapter, it becomes much more easy on the ear. I learned to really like it, and while it might not be my first choice in audio recording, I wouldn't hesitate to pick up another book using this technique as it added a nice 3rd dimension to it all.

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### **Julio Genao says**

my goodness, but this was fun.

by the time I started worrying that the twisty subterfuge would drain the story of momentum I looked up and realized I'd practically inhaled this badboy to the 70 percent mark.

and then some shit went down and my heart was pounding in my throat.

meanwhile, this edition has a trio of follow-up stories at the end, so 70 percent turned out to be 90 percent.

bravo!

a lush, layered, ingeniously taut melange of gripping skullduggery, sword fights, bisexual escapades, and even a perilous courtroom drama for shits and giggles.

my only complaint would be the fate of Michael, whose arc does not receive a satisfying conclusion.

other than that, tho?

booyakasha!

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### **Bradley says**

First, I should point out that the audiobook of this novel is a fantastic treat, including multiple voices including the author, herself, but also ambient sounds such as background conversations and even a cat! Music, too! But don't let that dissuade you, either, because it's all low-key enough to let us focus mainly on the tale at hand.

So what is this? Is it really fantasy?

Honestly, I don't think there's much fantasy at all, but if you like swords and high 18th century culture on a slight steroid high and full of homosexual men murdering each other for profit in high society, then by all means, come on over and read this book! :)

I was in the mood for lots of fast conversation and a bit of wit and this book has that in spades. Intrigue is really what it's all about. I got through the book in an enjoyable flash, but to be frank, I kinda stumbled a bit with the big court scene. It was interesting once I got over the fact it broke my pace, but it wasn't what I was quite expecting.

I was expecting a tragedy. But, No! This remains an old-style comedy, where bad things happen but the upturn is always around the corner. But what about the old adage that those who live by the sword, die by the sword?

Read it for yourself! :) There's no escaping your fate.

This novel is now considered a "new classic", btw. I think it's classic and timeless fun. I suppose that's the definition. :)

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### **Caravaggion says**

i started reading this because the description reminded me of Captive Prince and promised high fantasy lgbt diversity and at least in that point i have not been altogether disappointed

the thing is, this book isn't BAD or anything, and i did enjoy reading it, and i'm deffinitley going to read the sequels too, but did it really impress me? nope sadly not

but you still gotta give this book some credit, it was published in 1987, and it has more diversity than most books written these days?

#### **THINGS I LIKED ABOUT IT:**

- everyone is bisexual
- no homophobia whatsoever
- very intriguing and unique lead characters
- well written sword fight scenes

#### **THINGS I DID NOT LIKE ABOUT IT:**

- the characters were so unique they weren't very likable characters? like, you can't really relate to any of them? personally i didnt mind that much but they are pretty obnoxious
- the political plot wasnt THAT groundbreaking tbh \*shrugs\*
- the worldbuilding and side characters were kinda mediocre

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### **Lightreads says**

Politics, class, sword fighting, and an intense, subtle M/M romance. This book just made me happy. It's clever but not baroque, emotionally resonant, sweet and bitter and tense. I get the impression this was Kushner's first published novel, and there are a few missteps -- most notably a belief that the reader will be as interested in secondary characters as in the protagonists. But what protagonists they are -- subversive, unfitting, sympathetic. It's also complex and nuanced, and I suspect when I read it again (which I will) it will be a new experience

and angle all over again. By leaps and bounds my favorite out of the month.

