



Racing the Dark

Alaya Dawn Johnson

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Racing the Dark is set in a land of volcanoes and earthquakes, plagues and typhoons, of island nations bound by fear of the spirits they imprisoned to control their volatile environment. Lana, a teenaged girl on a nameless backwater island, finds an ominous blood-red jewel that marks her as someone with power, setting in motion events that drive her away from her family and into an apprenticeship with a mysterious one-armed witch.

Racing the Dark Details

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Author : Alaya Dawn Johnson

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From Reader Review Racing the Dark for online ebook

Patricia Hamill says

Starts off a bit rough with a little TMI, but all within context of the world building. Follows a couple of main characters, primarily the girl who has been sold to a witch as an apprentice and her ex-teacher who ends up taking on the responsibility of guarding the prison of a dangerous spirit.

I most enjoyed the world building. The islands, the cultures, the magic and spirits all blend together into a fantastically unique and interconnected tapestry. The death (a character) was super interesting.

Overall, this is a very good story. I would recommend it to folks who like fantasy with more of an epic feel.

I picked this up at some point while it was on a free promo.

Jamie says

It's been a while since I read Racing the Dark but I can remember how much I loved this series. Alaya Dawn Johnson is a masterful storyteller and you would never guess that this is her debut novel. She writes like an old pro. There are just so many reasons why I would recommend this book to anyone. She has a vivid imagination and I can honestly say there has never been anything quite like this story before. Her education in Foreign cultures really shines in this series. I'm not going to really go into plot, you can read the description for the book but I will say her characters are very three dimensional. It's not your average cliché coming of age tale. Lana's is both strong and tragic, she does good things and makes her fair share of mistakes. I've read the sequel and her writing just gets stronger and stronger as she goes. Nothing ever feels forced or fake in her stories. Do yourself a favor and read this tragic tale. I promise you've never read anything quite like this before.

----NOTE----

Due to money issues the publisher doesn't want to publish anymore of these books (guess they didn't make enough money) so this and the second book are all we get. Still a great read but it's a shame because it's so good and original. I'd really love for her to be able to finish the series. I'm hoping one day she can self publish the ending

April says

Compelling narrative, interesting female lead, unique mythos and surprisingly nuanced exploration of morality.

I was all set to give this novel four stars--right up until the last fifty pages where the love interest is introduced for the first time. I think the one thing that bugs me about Alaya Dawn Johnson's portrayal of romance in her novels (I've only read two, but there seems to be a pattern) is that they're really reliant on, like, animal magnetism? It's like, as soon as the main character meets her soon-to-be-boyfriend it's like the two of them instantly know they're destined to be together forever and then they just go for it?

I mean, I don't mean to be especially harsh on Ms. Johnson but this, like, gazing intensely into each others' eyes and thinking about how much you "want" another person is, like, a trope that I'd wish popular fiction would overcome. I'm certain that it may reflect SOME people's experiences--I'm sure that there may be couples that were instantly attracted to each other and like were totally absorbed with beholding the other person, but it doesn't resonate well with me?

The hyper-dramatic everything about the romance in this book left me with a bit of a sour taste in my mouth. Lana, the main character, decides to live with her love interest after spending seven days with him? Maybe I'm a cynic but the whole "getting swept of your feet" kind of makes me want to gag.

Other than that, though, I found the book to be entertaining and intriguing--definitely different from anything I've read before!

Linda Robinson says

An interesting story premise set in an archipelago of island nations, calmed by the centuries-long binding of the elemental spirits. It's a coming of age story. And this book is the first in a trilogy. One assumes that the spirits of wind, fire and water put up a good fight to remain free, and the captors had to be powerful and effective. Johnson affords some people an inordinate amount of superior strength in working with spirits, and then sets a young, inexperienced girl up against these. Okay so far, but, Iolana, our girl hero, starts right out in violating the tenets that allow her world to exist at all, in her first act of pending adulthood. Pretty weighty as the Inciting Incident in the world of story arc. I've read book 2 and still don't know what that peek at a major mistake has to do with anything. The women are powerful, but in a weak yang way: power can be used for evil, and then by golly, it is used for evil.

Lara says

I really expected to love this based on how much I liked Johnson's most recent release, Moonlight. But I had a really hard time with this one.

It started out well enough--sort of a Polynesia-esque setting, a coming-of-age ceremony, and a girl who hides the fact that she's been marked as something more than a diver by a dying mandagah fish. The descriptions were a little clunky, but I was enjoying seeing where the story would go from here.

But then...it scattered. And it ended up feeling like we were following too many people in too many different directions and I couldn't really get attached to any of them. The pacing felt extremely choppy as well, so that I was fairly interested in some parts and not at ALL interested in others. I found myself skimming for most of the second half of the book.

I guess I liked the idea of the story, but I just didn't feel like it hung together well at all. I doubt I'll read the rest of this trilogy.

Sarah says

I have a hard time with fiction. Sometimes I wonder why I'm so damn picky, hesitant to try out a new book,

and generally spend most of my time rereading things I already know are good. And then I remember. It's because there's so much disappointing, bad, or straight up offensive stuff out there. Now wait, this book wasn't offensive, nor perhaps bad per se, but it sure was disappointing. It had so much awesome potential! 1. Fantasy! 2. Society where women are revered! 3. Mostly characters of color! 4. Environmental fantasy about balance, not about conquering! 5. Apparently there are themes about power, the cost of power and sacrifice.

But the writing! The writing! I guess it could have been a lot worse. But there is so much telling. And about unimportant details. I didn't get a sense of immediacy or urgency from the book at all. And the characterization is very poor. Nearly every sentence tells us something about what the main character did, thought, felt, or saw, but I still know nothing about who she is and why I should care about her. And those awesome sounding themes of power, sacrifice, balance, the environment etc? Had still not shown up a third of the way through the book when I decided I was too bored to continue. Which is too bad, because I get the feeling that Alaya Dawn Johnson has a pretty cool plot/mythology that she wants to tell us about somewhere behind all the talking about what Lana is doing and how hard her life is. And I want to hear that story. Just maybe in a more gripping way. Sadness.

Renee says

Over the past few years I have noticed that I pick up fantasy novels with more and more trepidation. For a genre in which an author can literally write whatever he or she can imagine, quite often the plot lines are formulaic and the characters one-dimensional. A number of books feature the powerful and quick-witted female or male lead, the quiet personality that slowly grows into the greatest source of magic ever seen, or the rag-tag band of individuals on a quest of some sort; and in most of these cases the scheme of the novel is on a charted course just a hop skip and jump away from the Lord of the Rings. In some cases, a well-written novel can make up for the formula (but not generally for one-dimensional characters, because how can you even argue for good writing in that case?), but still it presses on one after a while. Why pick up fantasy (or really any novel) if you already know how a book will end up? Luckily, I have had a good streak in the past year. There have only been a few novels that I finished and thought to myself, "Well, I could have done without *that*." And luck struck again this time.

Johnson's novel *Racing the Dark* sticks to no tried formula I am aware of. The closest thing I could liken this to is *A Wizard of Earthsea* by LeGuin, based on the geography and attention to describing varying social groups, but even that comparison is stretching quite far. In *Racing the Dark* we follow Lana, a girl attempting to deny her magical destiny and live the normal life of what is similar to a pearl diver. Her drive to keep her fate a secret leads her down an extremely twisty path that would be too involved to try and explain here. I can say that this book has strong, vivid description and characters that care deeply for one another; relationships of any kind are well-explored and outcomes of those relationships are not what you would expect. In short, despite the fantasy setting, the characters seem very real, and it was a simple thing to relate to most of them.

In fact am only giving this four, rather than five stars, due to two minor shortcomings:

1. The varying peoples in the world Johnson has created are very similar to those found on Earth. While reading I could say, "Ah, so *this* group of people are like the _____ during the _____ time period." It made visualization very easy, but disrupted the flow a bit at times.
2. I am never a fan of a novel that ends in a cliffhanger. Yes, we are aware going into this that it is the first novel in a trilogy. There is no need to leave the reader hanging, unless of course, you do not anticipate they will pick up the next volume otherwise.

All in all, there is so very little to complain about here I feel silly doing so. This is a brilliant first novel. Usually one finds this type of cohesive writing with much more seasoned authors. I expect good things from Johnson in the future, and will make a point to revisit Lana again.

Jenny Delandro says

What a unique world this author has created.. but there are massive holes in it as well.

I thought the idea of taking a promising apprentice by a questionable 'master' was a well worn one but the execution of this relationship has been thoughtfully done.

There is only hints of malice and evil about Akua and her actions always seem to lead on to a greater plan. Lana is a diver who scores an incredible gift from the sea but chooses to hide it... Lana as an apprentice sees only the good deeds done by Akua until she finds out about the sacrifice that Akua demanded from Saulo.. Lana does not seem mature even after fleeing the death spirit or becoming a dark angel, or seeking comfort with the water guardian... she does not seek her own answers .. she still expects Akua to tell her the truth even though she knows that Akua has mislead her in the past.

There are questions posed in this book that will have me looking eagerly for the next installment.

Traci Loudin says

This is a unique book. The worldbuilding is amazing, though some of it is familiar, such as the idea of the elements, including death. Multiple situations had me bawling my eyes out, and when real life had me down, I realized I didn't have the fortitude to continue reading. I had to wait for better times before I could pick it back up.

Unfortunately, it didn't really have an ending, since it's the first book in a series. I will say the plot seemed meandering at some points, as though it needed a little tightening from the editor.

Overall though, I liked the gray (not black and white) characters and plot. And the world was very interesting. I'd recommend it to anyone who wants to start a series in a unique secondary world with magic.

P. Kirby says

The notable aspect of *Racing the Dark* is it's setting, at least for the first few chapters. Lana, a thirteen year old girl, begins the story on a tropical island -- think Hawaii, right down to the language and some of the customs. She's about to undergo an initiation into adulthood, which, since she is a diver, requires a solo dive to find a mandagah fish and extract a jewel from its mouth. Mandagah fish and their jewels are like oysters and pearls to Lana's island, a source of income and also a connection to spiritual practices.

Lana, who has never been a strong diver, not only stays underwater for an astonishingly long time, but also happens upon a rare dying mandagah who literally offers her two rare jewels. Technically, this means that Lana is marked (because this is fantasy and there has to be a Chosen One) for greatness. Lana, however, just wants to be normal, and she hides one of the jewels, the red one that marks her.

Soon after, things start to go bad on the island. The mandagah fish, who were already in decline, move into

the endangered zone. Then there are torrential rains that cause the death of Lana's best friend.

Facing a bleak future on the island, their main source of income, the mandagah fish and jewels, gone, Lana and her parents leave their formerly idyllic isle for a much larger, urban island. (Essentially the "mainland" but still an island.) And there, things get progressively worse, until, in a moment of desperation, Lana's mother arranges an apprenticeship for Lana with a mysterious witch woman.

This witch woman, however, may be the agent of a much darker force, maybe even the power that is wrecking havoc on the climate of the entire region. Lana eventually "escapes" the witch's influence, only to find herself bound to a death itself and destined to become a harbinger of chaos.

The novel's initial setting, a South Pacific-style island, is a refreshing change from the usual Euro-clone medieval milieu that infects fantasy. As is the fact that Lana, with the corresponding native heritage, isn't the typical lily-white heroine. Unfortunately, once Lana leaves her island, the freshness of the novel's locale fades, as the most of the events take place in rather generic settings -- a big city, a small village, the stronghold of an elemental lord.

On the other hand, Lana is a compelling protagonist for most of the story, and her eventual transformation is pretty cool. I mean, wings? Neato!

The plot takes a turn for the worse, however, when Lana meets her true wuv, and he spirits her away to his stronghold, where they continue to be more and more in love. And thus, a formerly strong female character turns into just another hormone-sodden teenager.

The story's ending is a rather cliffy, and I'm torn. I want to find out what happens next, but...I really can do without the insipid love story. Hmmm...

Tinsara83 says

i dont write reviews often but when i do, its for extraordinary books. alaya dawn johnson painted a beautiful world that i hold dear to my heart. i love this book.

Elizabeth says

[the major players were almost all female. Thus I was kinda bummed when Kai become such a savior. I do like Kai, though, (in part, I suspect, because of Ino -- and really, Lana's primary element has always been water, so it makes sense that that's where she would find the most alliance/pr

Phoenixfalls says

I hate epic fantasy. I hate the Chosen One trope, I hate the perspective switching that's now de rigeur. I have a strong aversion for coming-of-age plots, and love-practically-at-first-sight, and absolutely anything having to do with Fate. This book has all of those things. So why did I read it?

I love high fantasy. You must understand that I define epic fantasy as only those fantasies where the plot

involves the saving of the world, while high fantasy is simply any fantasy taking place in a secondary world. Obviously, the two sub genres overlap quite a bit. So while I try to avoid it, I do sometimes end up reading an epic fantasy novel, if the secondary world seems interesting enough.

This one was.

So much high fantasy takes place in a generic medieval Europe, particularly France and the British Isles; a small but visible minority takes place in vaguely Arabian or Chinese settings. I don't think I have ever encountered another fantasy novel that draws on Hawaii for its backdrop, as this one does. It's set in Hawaii only as much as Jacqueline Carey's *Kushiel's Legacy* series is set in France or Robin McKinley's *Beauty* is set in England -- which is to say, Johnson took the names and some elements of the geography and not much more -- but just that much difference was enough to pique my interest and put this on Mt. TBR.

Unfortunately, there is a danger attendant upon breaking that sort of new ground. A fantasy novel set in generic medieval Europe can draw on a wealth of world-building tropes that an average fantasy reader will expect and accept with no further explanation; a fantasy novel set in an unfamiliar setting has to be built from scratch, and the average fantasy reader (at least if the average fantasy reader is at all like me) is likely to interrogate the world-building a bit more closely.

So, for example, I loved exploring the world of Johnson's outer islands -- that world made sense given my knowledge of Hawaii and other parts of Polynesia. But when the story moved to the inner islands, which are temperate rather than tropical, the world started to feel. . . confused. I believe Johnson was trying to evoke Japan, but little European influences seemed to sneak their way in -- a character playing a lute, another character using nightshade and bitterwort in a potion. Of course, this IS high fantasy, and the whole world is made up, so using European-derived items isn't inherently WRONG. . . but when the world feels so different, I found it distracting to see something suddenly the same.

Still, while I became less enamored with the world as the novel went on, I was pleased with the level of technical prowess Johnson showed in this, her debut novel. The pacing was a bit uneven, but I never found the somewhat convoluted plot hard to follow. And while I always felt distanced from the individual characters and their mental/emotional states, I was very much invested in the survival of the world as a whole, and the climax of the novel was therefore intense and effective. The cliffhanger ending (another reason I hate epic fantasy) worked, at least in that it made me want to run out and grab the next book immediately. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that this series is that most frustrating of types: doomed forever to be unfinished because it was dropped by the publisher.

Shauna says

This YA novel has a Third-World-like setting in which poverty and disease rife and people must make painful choices to survive.

The worldbuilding is well done (although it could have used a little more explaining), and novel is full of suspense as the heroine, Lailana, must make difficult choice after difficult choice and is often being pursued by something awful.

Two things disappointed me. First, the cover image and back cover copy led me to believe the novel would take place in a place like Hawaii, so it was a shock when in chapter 3 I realized the book was going to be an urban fantasy. Second, there is no ending; it continues straight into the next book in the series. I did buy the next book, after some hesitation, so I could find out how things resolve, although I'm worried it will end

with no ending too.

With so much YA fantasy being on the simplistic side, this is a good book for a teen or adult who wants a story with more meat.

Angela R. says

I picked up this book after really enjoying another book by the same author, called Moonshine. When I first picked up Racing the Dark, I was immediately surprised by the author's somewhat clumsy writing style. I mean, the storyline was engrossing, but I almost put the book down unfinished after the first couple chapters. If I tried to write a fantasy novel, it would be almost exactly like this one. I have some good ideas, sure. But unfortunately not a talent for writing. This book read like something a not particularly talented student might write for a creative writing class. I really almost gave up on the novel.

But I'm glad that I stuck with it. By the middle of the book I was firmly hooked. Despite somewhat clumsy word choice, the author managed to weave together various plot twists, multiple story lines, and well developed characters. The magic system used in this book was quite original (and that's quite unusual in the fantasy genre) and the plot unpredictable. This was the author's first novel, and I guess her inexperience showed. But once you get past that, the book will suck you in and you'll hunger for more. I will definitely pick up the sequel and look forward to reading more from this author.
