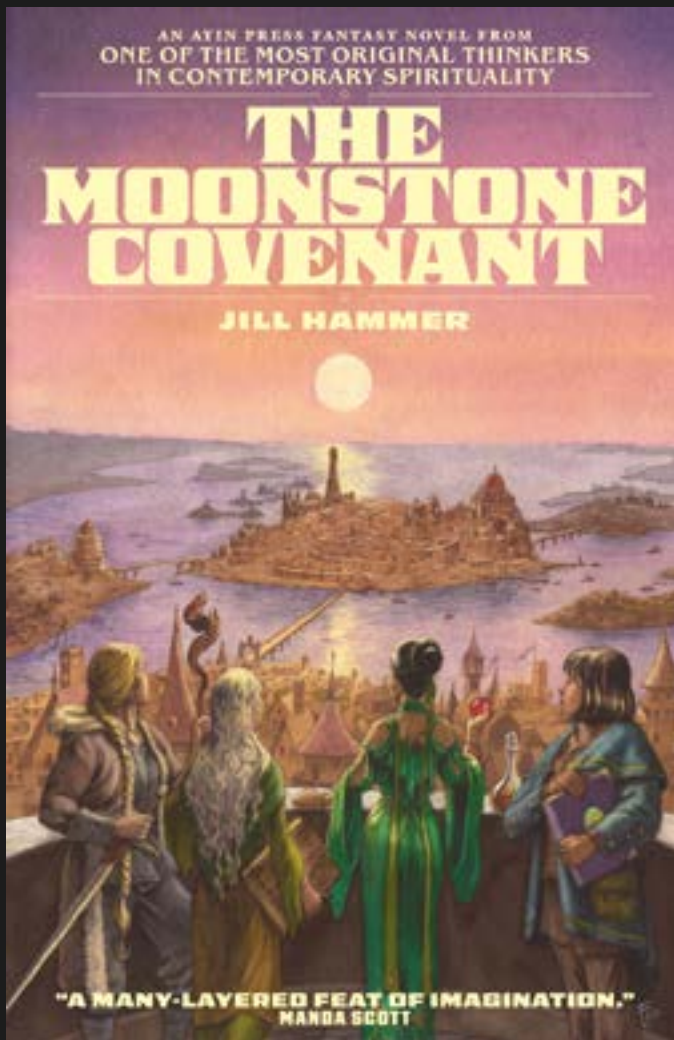


OPINION

Book Summary



The Moonstone Covenant

(2024) by Jill Hammer follows Istehar Sha'an, a refugee forest-dweller who can speak with trees and books. She leads her displaced Sha'an people to the floating island-city of Moonstone, a multicultural archipelago centered on a great Library. As Sha'an refugees, they face suspicion and persecution, especially under the ambitious Prince Vilya. Istehar is married to three wives—a warrior librarian, a former concubine, and an apothecary haunted by her parents' murder—and their complex polyamorous household becomes the emotional core of the narrative. After Istehar purchases a strange book titled *A Poisoner's Guide to Moonstone*, the quartet unravels a conspiracy around the city's founding, exposing political corruption, religious persecution, and a deep secret that could reshape Moonstone's future.

Between Elfland and Poughkeepsie: The Moonstone Covenant and Fantasy Style

By Isaac Sage

High Fantasy – Mystery – Queer Fantasy

In her seminal essay, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” Ursula K. Le Guin takes an existing fantasy passage and changes four words to those of real-world places and terms. In doing so, she transforms the scene to one indistinguishable from any modern political novel. She writes: “Something has gone wrong. The book from which I quote is not fantasy, for all its equipment of heroes and wizards. If it was fantasy, I couldn’t have pulled that dirty trick on it by changing four words.” Fantasy, writes Le Guin, draws upon “the wellspring of myth.” It should not feel stylistically interchangeable with work set in the here and now. There *should* be a romanticism to it, a sense of weighty otherness, of the ancient and the alien. As Le Guin puts it: “...the point of Elfland is that you are not at home there. It’s not Poughkeepsie.”

Jill Hammer’s debut fantasy novel, *The Moonstone Covenant*, walks an unstable line between Elfland and Poughkeepsie. Set in the glittering archipelago-metropolis of Moonstone, the novel centers on four women—all of whom are married to each other—and their attempts to solve an ancient murder with hidden consequences for their current day. *Moonstone*’s greatest draw is undoubtedly its setting. The eponymous city is multicultural and multilayered, filled with opulence and poverty alike, believable as any real metropolis. It is a joy to explore, as are its denizens: warrior-librarians, dynasties of high-class concubines and, most interestingly, a diaspora of forest-dwelling refugees, chased by warlords from their homeland upriver. These people called Sha’an, worshippers of books and trees, are having difficulty assimilating into Moonstone; their insularity is distrusted by its citizens and despised by its would-be despots.

Istehar, the most unique of *Moonstone's* protagonists, is a Sha'an priestess. It's hard not to see a parallel with Hammer herself, who is an accomplished rabbi and spiritualist. In *Moonstone's* standout sequence, a vengeful tree spirit from the Sha'an homeland has taken refuge in a princess, cursing her with a supernatural pregnancy. Hammer describes Istehar's exorcism of the spirit with sharp detail: "*Come, honored one, I whisper. Come the way a child comes... My uterus cramps, and I feel a discharge from my vulva I know must be blood... I have a strange desire to sink into the carpet-weave and sit in the water among the ibises.*" Meanwhile, the princess sees "her stomach and breasts deflating like empty waterskins," as the pregnancy is drawn from her belly into the priestess's.

Here we've entered Elfland indeed, a scene informed by both Hammer's vibrant imagination and her cultural tradition, evoking as it does the Jewish possession story of the Dybbuk. Yet the powerful, mythic specificity of such a scene—and of *Moonstones's* setting—are frequently and frustratingly undercut by stylistic problems.

For one, there is the tense: first-person present. Many writers have wielded it effectively, but Philip Pullman is correct when he describes its "limited range of expressiveness," which "presse[s]" the reader "up against the immediate." Such a style *can* be wielded to visceral effect, but it is not the right fit for a fantasy about a sprawling, ancient city—a fantasy which directly evokes the Babylonian Captivity. "A wider temporal perspective," as Pullman puts it, feels sorely needed: a break from the novel's busy plot, and a wide-view, grander lens on Hammer's fascinating world.



Jacques Joseph Tissot, "The Flight of the Prisoners" (c. 1896–1902). Depicts Judeans being led into Babylonian exile after the fall of Jerusalem.

There is also no denying that, following the success of *The Hunger Games*, first-person present tense often smacks of Young Adult, especially within speculative fiction. This is not necessarily a problem, save that Hammer doesn't seem to *want* to write a YA novel. Yet, other YA hallmarks make their way into *Moonstone*, too. Most unforgivable are its flashbacks, which center on the protagonists' years at a school for the city's elite. These scenes damage the pacing and feel derivative of fantasy's post-*Harry Potter* obsession with school. Worse, the novel's villain, an authoritarian prince who uses the Sha'an as his scapegoat, is seen gaining hatred for Istehar at school. While it's acknowledged that he distrusted the Sha'an before this, the general impression given is that his anti-Sha'an populism is fueled above all else by teenage beef, an idea at once ludicrous and juvenile. Add to this some unwelcome, Whedonesque quipping—"Nothing on earth could make me trust you...you don't even return your Library books on time"—and we wind up with a novel in conflict with itself: a highly original world crafted by an expert spiritualist, conveyed via a generically modern, market-friendly style, all too susceptible to Le Guin's dirty trick.

The Moonstone Covenant is Hammer's first fantasy, and it *is* one to be proud of. She has crafted a distinct and convincing world, with an ending ripe for a sequel. Yet it is hard not to feel like this world, this story, was diminished slightly by its telling. Too often we discuss fantasy in a manner almost statistical: How deep is the worldbuilding? How complex is the magic system? How "spicy" is the romance? But none of these criteria will get us any closer to Le Guin's wellspring of myth. For that, we need *style*: prose and imagery, specific and strange. More scenes like Istehar's exorcism, and fewer schoolyard flashbacks. We need Elfland, not Poughkeepsie. I hope that, should she pen a *Moonstone* sequel, Hammer chooses to take us there. She has already proved herself more than capable.



Extract from cover art by Federico Parolo and Cem Eskinaziv

About Isaac Sage

Isaac Sage is a writer, researcher, and arts worker currently living in Glasgow, Scotland. Born in Los Angeles, he studied English, Creative Writing and History at Kenyon College, before flying halfway across the world for a master's degree in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow. His work on fantasy studies has previously been selected for the World Science Fiction Convention's academic programme.