The Piper of Shadonia
by Linda Smith

Shade & Sorceress (Book 1 of The Last Days of Tian Di trilogy)
by Catherine Egan

Breakaway
by Maureen Ulrich

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

The Piper of Shadonia is the newest – and last – young adult fantasy novel by Alberta writer Linda Smith, who died in 2007 while working on edits for this novel. Editing work was completed at Coteau Books and the result is this fine novel for young readers aged 12 and up.

The Piper of Shadonia tells the story of 14-year-old Tobin, who lives with his parents in the city of Cradoc, part of the old country of Shadonia, which has been included as a section of the Forenzian Empire for over 200 years. Tobin’s father, Hamish, has been appointed the mayor of Cradoc, a job he accepted because he hoped to do a better job than the previous mayor, and where he tries to balance allegiance to Forenzia and to Cradoc. Tobin feels caught in the middle; he feels a deep loyalty to the old kingdom, with its own kings and queens, but since his father is the mayor, he must show support for the Forenzian Empire.

Tobin possesses a special gift, which he is learning to use – the ability to let his mind become one with his surroundings so that he can merge with the grass, bushes, and flowers, thus becoming invisible – though this only works when he is outside and can concentrate fully on the blending. When Tobin suspects that a wandering group of puppeteers are using their shows to foment a rebellion against the Forenzians, he uses his gift to learn more details, and to listen to Forenzian plans to arrest the rebel supporters.

Meanwhile, Tobin’s grandmother, a strong supporter of Shadonian ideals and freedoms, has suddenly died. She leaves Tobin a wooden flute, after telling him that in times of trouble he must play it. Tobin doesn’t understand or want more powers but he discovers that by playing it, he can cause a river spirit to rise and form a protective wall of water. Using this, he helps the puppeteers escape across the river, and then flees with them into the forest and eventually into the distant mountains.

As he travels with the puppeteers, Tobin is gradually accepted by them and adjusts to a much poorer standard of living. He wants to help free Shadonia from colonial rule, but inevitably this will involve violence and bloodshed, which he abhors. When the rebels ask for his help in kidnapping the emperor, Tobin must decide whether or not to support his new friends, betray his own father in doing so, and chance contributing to violence and death.

The Piper of Shadonia has a Middle Ages-type of setting, including castles, battles with bows and arrows, and gypsy-like troupes acting out plays and wandering around the countryside to pass on messages. Tobin’s internal conflict carries the story, though perhaps his agonizing over the betrayal could have been emphasized even more.

Young readers who enjoy this novel should check out Smith’s previous fantasies, Tales of Three Lands Trilogy and the Freyan Trilogy. I reviewed several of these previously, and I recommend them all.
Shade & Sorceress is the first book in a planned fantasy trilogy by Catherine Egan.

Set in the imaginative worlds of Di Shang and Tian Di, the novel is an adventure-filled fantasy of sorceresses, alien creatures with magical powers, flying dragons, and shape-changing Shades.

The main character is 12-year-old Eliza Tok, whom we meet as a human living with her father, Rom, on the island of Holburg, in the country of Di Shang. Eliza has spent most of her life, since her mother’s death when Eliza was two, wandering, gypsy-like, in various regions of Di Shang. Finally, having settled in Holburg for three years, Eliza has managed to form a deep friendship with Nell.

As the story begins, five Mancers arrive on giant winged dragons. The Mancers, who can read minds and transmit thoughts without speaking, have searched for Eliza for a long time, though she has no idea why. She is surprised to discover they are somewhat afraid of her.

Subdued with a magical powder, Eliza is taken away and awakens in the Mancer Citadel. There she meets Kyreth who claims to be her grandfather. She also learns that her mother, Rea, was a Shang Sorceress, the line of which has passed to Eliza, whose destiny now is to protect humans from being enslaved. According to Kyreth, Rea rejected the man intended for her, married Rom, and then used magic to hide Eliza. They have searched for her ever since – which explains Eliza’s nomadic wanderings. However, since she has been fathered by an ordinary human, they don’t know if she possesses the full powers of a Shang Sorceress.

Eliza tries to convince them that she possesses no magic, but they insist on helping her try to develop these powers. When the evil Xia Sorceress captures Rom, Eliza must attempt to save him, but she doesn’t know whom she can trust.

Young fantasy-lovers will enjoy the author’s imaginative ideas such as doors that appear on a blank wall when you knock, dragon bones used to construct a house, a fur-lined cave that can heal a dying human, and a mirror that grants eternal youth and beauty. The one feature that bothered me is the viewpoint switches. These are particularly used in the first part of the novel and I found them disconcerting. Young readers like to know immediately whom to identify with, but in the early chapters the viewpoint switches from Eliza to her father, to the Holburg police chief, to Nell, and even to a couple of the Mancers. Fortunately, as the story progresses, the viewpoint is much more definitely that of Eliza, but occasional switches are still made. Many of these could have been avoided with some careful editing and changes.

The targeted audience is 10 and up and perhaps young readers raised on Harry Potter will not find it difficult but, given the complicated plot, many dream-like passages and detailed descriptions, 10-year-olds might find it heavy reading.

Shade & Sorceress is Egan’s first novel. A Canadian, she currently lives in New Jersey. Readers who enjoy this first novel should watch for the rest of the trilogy.

Breakaway is the third book in the Jessie Mac series by Saskatchewan author Maureen Ulrich. It continues the story of Jessie McIntyre, a teen whose life revolves around hockey, school, family, friends, and the occasional boyfriend.

In the first book of the series, Power Plays, 14-year-old Jessie had recently moved from Saskatoon to Estevan, where she had to deal with a new school, bullying, and fitting in with the Estevan Xtreme hockey team. The second book, Face Off, picked up where the first one ended and dealt mainly with Jessie’s second season with the Xtreme, where a number of problems developed. Both books included many other teen issues, such as bullying, alcohol, self-mutilation, teen violence, and sexual orientation.

In Breakaway, Jessie is 17, in her final year of high school. She still plays hockey, but now with a newly formed AAA team, the Estevan McGillicky Oilers. Hockey problems include finding a new coach, adjusting to the higher level of play at the AAA level, and worries about being scouted by
university teams. When Jessie is elected captain, the job keeping the team on track falls to her, and it’s not an easy task when some jealous members want to undermine her.

Jessie has other issues, too, including boyfriend problems. Evan has always been someone she classed as a friend, but when Jessie finally agrees to being his girlfriend, he suddenly becomes much too serious. At the same time, Jessie still carries a torch for her former boyfriend, Mark, while having to push aside advances from Liam, to whom she is also attracted.

Other issues that trouble Jessie include difficulties with her younger sister, Courtney, who is 11, but getting into trouble with her sophisticated, older friends; how Jessie can support friends who are cut from the team or no longer want to belong; and the age-old 12th-grade problem of school grad – who to take and what to wear.

Teen hockey players and fans will delight in the play-by-play details of Jessie’s games, and those with knowledge of the WHL will like the references to various teams. Teens who are less hockey-oriented can still enjoy reading about the other issues Jessie faces, especially the potential three-way collision of boyfriends, and Jessie’s worries about the future – what university team to try out for and what career to consider.

Since Jessie is now 17 – 18 by the end of the story – this third book in the series seems aimed at older readers with more mature interests. This book can be read on its own, although those doing so will find a somewhat confusing number of people in the first couple of chapters.

Author Maureen Ulrich is a former middle-years and high-school teacher. Her understanding of teen issues and her knowledge of hockey is very evident in the Jessie Mac trilogy. Though Breakaway appears to end the series, I think fans would like to know what Jessie does next. I particularly like the titles of all three books. Each fits in so well with what happens, both in the hockey sense and in the context of Jessie’s life. ♦

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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