



# Is Across the Nightingale Floor a Crossover Title?

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**Clive Barnes** on an epic novel with broad appeal.

Published as an adult book, Lian Hearn's epic adventure, **Across the Nightingale Floor**, transcends, according to its publisher, 'the conventionally recognized barriers within the fiction market'. What is its appeal and to whom? **Clive Barnes** investigates.<!--break-->

**Across the Nightingale Floor** is a novel that has been the subject of considerable hype. Even before its September publication, the publishing rights had been sold worldwide and the film rights had been optioned for large sums. Back at the beginning of the year, a mini mystery had been stoked up over the real author behind the pseudonym, who turns out to be Gillian Rubinstein, a children's author of long standing. The marketing has been so energetic that it attracted the attention of the most unlikely organ of literary criticism, **Private Eye**. The Eye's argument was that the book had been cynically manufactured to capture the crossover market of adults and children. This was previously a no man's area of publishing which has now hit both the financial jackpot with Harry Potter, and the critical jackpot with **The Amber Spyglass**. Add to that the box office and merchandising success of Harry Potter (again) and **Lord of the Rings**, and the fact that this is the first book to be published of a trilogy that is already written, the publishing and film industry's enthusiasm is understandable.

Macmillan's claim that **Across the Nightingale Floor** 'transcends the conventionally recognized barriers within the fiction market' is an interesting one. Intended for anyone over the age of twelve, the novel might be seen as falling into the Young Adult bracket, a body of writing that has recently had new life injected into it. Yet, unlike most other crossover titles, it has been published as an adult book. As Julia Eccleshare noted in May's **BfK**, young people have always read adult novels, and if publishers and critics are becoming more aware of this, it can only be good for everyone's reading.

## A real work of literature

Although Hearn's novel may not be the epoch making and money spinning blockbuster that Macmillan would like it to be, it is certainly, contrary to the Eye's jaundiced view, a real work of literature that will be enjoyed by a wide age range. It is in a tradition of epic adventure that, in origin, was the fireside property of all ages; it uses the theme of youth growing to maturity as a means of exploring social mores; and it draws on a developing global culture, particularly among young people, where boundaries are generally becoming more fluid, whether between film and literature, or between cultures.

Anyone who knows nothing more of Japan than the films of Akira Kurosawa will immediately recognise the landscape. The currents of passion and intrigue boiling beneath the restraints of ritual and etiquette; violence with the skill and

concentration of a lethal dance; the sense of social hierarchy embedded in rigid codes of behaviour and notions of honour; and the acute awareness of the sensual beauty of the natural world and of art.

Its story concerns the fates of two young people, Takeo and Kaede, caught up in political struggles whose dimensions they only gradually understand and whose course they cannot control. The trappings and the sensibility of the novel are those of medieval Japan seen through the eyes of an Australian author. But the novel isn't an attempt to replicate Japanese history; rather it seeks to find a plane of epic storytelling, where East and West meet, much as Kurosawa did in his Shakespeare adaptations. As in courtly romance, Hearn's characters fall in love at a single glance and forever, whatever the cost to themselves, their families or the realm. In Hearn's Japanese fiefdoms, as in the world of Arthurian legend, magic flows at the periphery, from streams of ancient religion and esoteric craft, although here it is the prerogative of The Tribe, a close-knit, secretive clan of assassins.

The strongest element is the story itself. It's a well paced page turner with boldly drawn characters, which moves confidently between periods of relative calm and eruptions of shocking violence, like those that begin and end the book. Hearn has made an effort, too, to acknowledge her appreciation of Japanese style in the writing. She is sparing of the use of simile or metaphor, relying on the accumulation of sensory details to create atmosphere. There is a feeling of restraint in the telling that fits the subject and which means that adult material, particularly the depiction of sex and violence, while not passed over lightly, is not needlessly elaborated. Perhaps the most interesting aspect is Hearn's unobtrusive use of two narrative voices for the converging fates of Takeo and Kaede, Takeo's in the first person and Kaede's in the third person. A questioning of the different life experiences of men and women runs alongside a questioning of class and tribal divisions, and of the warrior ethos itself. All of which may or may not find more scope in the two books to come.

It remains to be seen whether the novel does break new ground in publishing. It all depends on reviewing practice and reader response. Confining reviews to the children's and young adult pages may well limit the novel's readership among adults, despite the experience of Harry Potter and 'His Dark Materials'. But, as far as young people's reading is concerned, **BfK**'s recent inclusion of adult titles in its new 14+ section, in addition to Young Adult imprints, is a step in the right direction.

**Across the Nightingale Floor** by Lian Hearn is published by Pan Macmillan (304pp, 1 4050 0032 5, £12.99 hbk).

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