

## First Opinion: Of Dragons and Genders: An Ancient Hero for the Twenty-First Century

Goodman, Alison. *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn*. New York: Viking Children's Books, 2008.

*James R. Gilligan*

Alison Goodman's *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn*, the first of two planned novels in a series, tells the story of Eon/Eona, a young female protagonist who is forced to hide a number of secrets as she strives for the title of Rat Dragoneye. Eon, posing as a twelve-year-old boy vying against eleven other twelve-year-old boys for the cherished post, is actually Eona, a physically lame sixteen-year-old girl. As is frequently the case in heroic adventures, Eon/Eona's epic quest to become Dragoneye and save the empire from the ambitious Lord Ido is essentially an inward journey in search of her own true nature. Eona cannot lay claim to her true dragon power until she finds the fortitude to assert her own genuine identity.

This fantasy novel's strength does not lie in its narrative—the story itself is a fairly formulaic version of the classic heroic monomyth: a reluctant and unlikely hero is called upon to save the world through a series of trials, assisted by various characters along the way, and manages to overcome great odds and achieve success. *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn* draws upon Asian cultural traditions and iconography in its fantasy rendition of the female bildungsroman to dramatize Eon/Eona's evolution from a scared, insecure, physically disabled "boy" incapable of embracing his/her true self to a powerful, benevolent, enlightened young lady who learns to harness the female energy bequeathed to her from her ancestors.

Issues of identity, maturation, and self-acceptance permeate the novel; these elements will appeal to adolescent female readers as well as readers who might be struggling with emerging "different" identities. Not only does Goodman foreground gender as a problematic factor in identity development, by depicting the protagonist as a girl who must masquerade as a boy before she is able to assert her own value as a woman and inherit the "female energy" that propels her to triumph, but she also includes a transgender character, Lady Dela, a man who lives as a woman and who serves as Eon/Eona's mentor in matters of court etiquette. Lady Dela is a noble, admirable character, and she plays a principal role in both the development of the narrative and the cultivation of Goodman's theme of gender identity. Not long after Eon/Eona uneasily acknowledges that she feels "more of the male spirit within" her than the female and recalls how she learned to act like a boy and avoid "the gaze of men," Lady Dela relates to Eon/Eona the story of how she came to acknowledge her identity as a woman:

“I am a woman in here,” she touched her head, “and here,” she touched her heart. “You are wrong when you say there is no power in being a woman. . . . I know there are many types of power in this world. . . . I found power in accepting the truth of who I am. It may not be a truth that others can accept, but I cannot live any other way. How would it be to live a lie every minute of your life? I don’t think I could do it.” (245)

Passages such as this will resonate with adolescent readers who are struggling to discover their identities, especially those who are confronting issues of gender identity and sexual orientation. Goodman also manages to unobtrusively weave into her narrative issues of tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity with regard to race and disability.

Teachers who choose to share *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn* with their students will need to be prepared to address the delicate issues of adolescent gender identity and sexual orientation. They will also have to confront questions regarding eunuchs (one prominent supporting character is a eunuch who fortifies himself with a “Sun drug”—the dragonworld equivalent of anabolic steroids) and geldings. These questions might prove to be less a challenge than the jagged pace of the narrative, which sometimes bogs down in lengthy descriptions of banquets, court politics, and council meetings. Ironically, the narrative pace slows to a crawl as the action of the story intensifies.

*Eon: Dragoneye Reborn* is an uneven but well-intentioned novel that seeks to infuse the genre of Young Adult fantasy with compelling matters of gender and sexuality. Although it falls somewhat short as a rousing fantasy read, it scores high marks for fostering social awareness and depicting authentically issues of adolescent identity development. Perhaps *Eona: The Last Dragoneye*, this novel’s planned sequel, will realize the potential that Goodman reveals here.

### About the Author

**James R. Gilligan** taught high school English in New York for nine years and holds a BA and an MA in English from the City University of New York-Queens College. Gilligan currently serves as the Student Teaching Placement Coordinator in the College of Education at Purdue, where he is also pursuing a PhD in Literacy and Language with a focus on secondary English Education and the development of sexual identity among preservice Language Arts teachers.

## Second Reaction: On the Brink of Enlightenment and the Dark Ages

Goodman, Alison. *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn*. New York: Viking Children's Books, 2008.

Jeff Spanke

Basking in the wake of *Harry Potter's* unprecedented literary success, contemporary young adult literature has seen a revival of lengthier, action-driven novels reminiscent of the hero's saga of Joseph Campbell lore. Libba Bray, and now Alison Goodman, have capitalized on this recent trend by attempting to recreate the genre, using an adolescent lens to focus their respective narratives. Goodman's most recent attempt at creating a fictional world plagued by corruption, power, fear, and heroism is *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn*. On the surface, the novel is simply more of the same: a YA story about the emergence of a protagonist in unfamiliar surroundings, where survival relies solely on acceptance of new responsibilities, who copes with the severing of ties with the past. Yet upon closer examination, *Eon* lends itself well to the class discussions of a high-school readership by offering universal lessons on culture, history, social roles, and maturation.

The saga begins as most YA stories do. Eon, a sixteen-year-old apprentice, is suddenly and unexpectedly hurled into a world of fantasy and intrigue. In the fictional *Empire of the Celestial Dragons*—Goodman's own breed of Hogwarts—Eon becomes the center of attention, where admiration for his unparalleled rise to fame collides with skepticism regarding his abilities and fear regarding his future. Further complicating his arrival in the public eye, Eon also carries a secret known only to himself and his master: in reality, Eon is *Eona*, a female Dragoneye. The novel follows Eona as she struggles to reconcile her place in a society that won't accept her true self with the reality that it may be the power stemming from her femininity that could thwart the efforts of the evil Lord Ido, who works feverishly to overthrow the emperor and seize power for himself.

The book finds an audience with anyone who loves contemporary YA as well as anyone who has an affinity for all things Eastern. Goodman does well to set her story in a time long ago in a land far, far away. As a teacher, I cherished the opportunity to open the book up to lessons and projects related to Eastern philosophy or culture, particularly because I feel that in today's America, we tend to homogenize Asian culture into one big glob of "different" and "weird." While the book transcends cultural distinctions because of the nature of the fictionalized world, with proper instruction, it could potentially accompany any unit on Japanese history or Chinese customs.

Even more so, importantly, the novel provides an excellent opportunity to examine our own prejudices and stereotypes involving gender, race, and class. I found that after my students read the book, we were able to enter into discussions about how social roles are determined and who, in varying contexts, has the power to control the values of a given society. For this reason alone, I found the book conducive to classroom discussion and integration with units on heroes, femininity, religion, mythology, and folklore. Though predictable to anyone familiar with the typical hero's journey, the book is a quick read offering students a valuable insight into the workings of their systems of power and struggle.

### About the Author

**Jeff Spanke** has a Master's degree in American Studies from Purdue University, where he studied the connection between YA Literature and early American captivity narratives. He currently teaches English in Crawfordsville, Indiana.