

Firebrand by Gillian Philip

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Brave hearts from another world. Brothers embark on a fantastically violent, utterly thrilling, tale in 16th century Scotland

Rival brothers have been much in the news of late, and *Firebrand*, Gillian Philip's third novel, opens with a young man about to put an arrow into his elder brother's heart. This isn't a Labour Party election, however, but 16th-century Scotland.

Seth's brother Conal is about to be burnt to death as a warlock, and Seth has sworn to kill him rather than let him suffer the torment of fire. Conal, however, is bound to a terrified young girl and insists that Seth shoot them both.

So begins a fantastically violent, utterly thrilling, tale. If you have a child who loves books such as *Wolf Brother*, *Across the Nightingale Floor* or *Twilight*, then this is the book for them.

For the brothers are not human. They come from a world that operates very much like ours, but with key differences. There, men and women are equals. They are extraordinarily beautiful but ferocious fighters who can heal mortal wounds, play wonderful music that sets you dancing and communicate telepathically. And they live for hundreds of years.

We have many stories about how they love to steal human children but, in fact, they can barely be bothered to look after their own. They are what we call Faeries, and what they call Sithe; and far from being the milksop creatures of picture books, they are passionate, devious and cruel.

Seth, our narrator, has been dumped on his father Griogair, a Sithe nobleman. Half feral and full of hatred, he is slowly tamed by his heroic half-brother, Conal, the legitimate heir to the clan, or "dun". The Sithe tribes are ruled by a cruel queen.

Seth's stepmother, one of the queen's most trusted counsellors, hates him. He becomes caught up in a deadly power struggle between two women, and he and his brother are exiled to the human world on the other side of the Veil, which shields them from mortals. Here, they must survive without drawing attention to

share via themselves: only Conal can't resist helping ignorant mortals, and their Queen will not only murder but make allies of the Sithe's vile, sadistic enemies.

The contemporary use of enchantment in children's literature is extensive, and from *I, Coriander* and *Cold Tom*, to the Sterkarms books, Artemis Fowl series and most recently Cornelia Funke's *Reckless*, these books are excellent — but *Firebrand* is one of the very best. Like Alan Garner, Philip reforges our most popular myths. Seth exudes a surly sexiness that girls will swoon over, but his rudeness, gutsiness and sense of humour will appeal to boys as much as the wild Scottish landscape in which he fights, hunts and rides for his life.

Philip's clear prose is as fiery as whisky; even as she relates terrible atrocities through the eyes of her hero, she springs clever shocks on the reader. Why does Seth's horse have gills? Why is it so dangerous for humans to cross the Veil? The complex world of *Firebrand* is consistently unsettling because you forget the rules of Fairyland, which are brilliantly exploited here.

This is a book that deserves to win prizes. Well done Strident, the tiny Scottish publisher that picked it up, and well done to anyone else who does the same — even if it does end on a cliffhanger that leaves you desperate for the next twist in the tale. This has to be the best children's fantasy novel of 2010.

Firebrand by Gillian Philip (Strident, £7.99); 384pp. Call 08452712134 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop to buy this book for £7.59

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Keith Charters

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Jane, it's brilliant, and I'd say 13+ to get the most out of it as its pure young adult/adult crossover. I can't wait for part 2 of the series (Bloodstone) to come out next year. I've seen Gillian present too (Edinburgh International Book Festival) and she's great (and very funny)...particularly when talking about how they used to torture witches in days gone by...and why. If other book festivals have any sense they'll snap her up while they still can.

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Mrs Lloyd

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Looks and sounds great! What age group might benefit the most from this book?

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