

Nero Book Club Notes

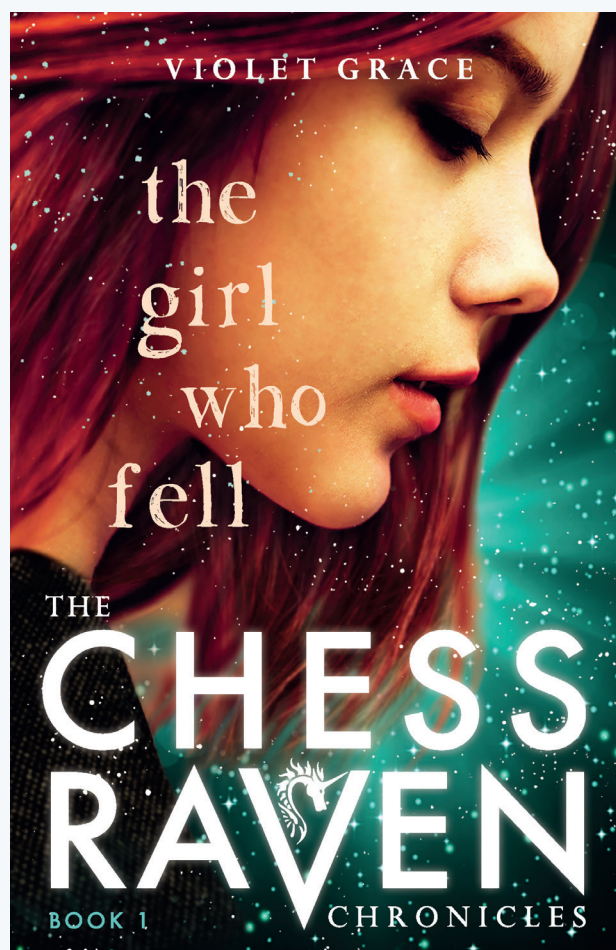
About the book

Chess Raven should be spending her days picking up rubbish on the side of the street – with all the other young offenders. She doesn't, thanks to the Second Chances program, where her rich sponsor (and the victim of her crime), Marshall Musgrave, has pulled some strings to get her a job working inside the V&A Museum in the middle of London. Instead of picking up garbage, Chess spends her day surrounded by beautiful objects with fascinating histories – such as the 'Luck of Eldenhall', a supposedly enchanted chalice said to have been stolen from the Fae, by the Musgrove family.

Chess doesn't believe in fairies or fairytales – she hasn't exactly had much experience with happy endings, given that her parents died when she was three and she was raised in a household of abuse and neglect. Gladys, who allows her to stay in the flat without paying rent, is the only one Chess feels anything for, the only one she is able to trust. But Chess is about to rethink everything she thought she knew about trust, family, fairytales, and love.

Because Chess is Fae, an important one. She is Princess Francesca Raven, the first fairy born from a union between a fairy and a mortal. She is the child of the Queen of the Fae, who rebelled against Fae law and married a mortal, a brilliant physicist. Chess' humanity gives her something the Fae don't have – a moral code. But not all Fae are happy to see her back. Almost immediately, Chess becomes a target for human and Fae alike. There are very few people on her side, and she doesn't know who she can trust. It seems that everyone knows Chess better than she knows herself.

In a centuries-old conflict between human and Fae, new and old, tensions balance on a knife-edge, and Chess is the only one who can wield the immense power necessary to restore peace to the kingdoms – but only if she can remember who she is.



TITLE: The Girl Who Fell

AUTHOR: Violet Grace

ISBN: 9781760640248

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SUBJECT: Young Adult Fiction/Fantasy

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Key themes

- Female agency
- Love
- Power
- Control
- Family

Female agency and power

'Once you find the courage to accept that you are the one you've been waiting for, you will find your power.'

One of the key themes of the novel, and one that sets it apart from other similar reads, is that of female agency and power. Trinovantum is a matriarchal society, with a number of female characters in positions of power. We see this play out when Jules, the unicorn who first saves Chess and brings her to Trinovantum, faces off against Second Officer Wynstar and forces him to submit to her rank. Similarly, note the level of deference and respect given to Gladys, the Luminaress, and the Supreme Executor.

'Female genes are dominant so our queens produce more daughters than sons,' Gladys explains. Then, lowering her voice as if she doesn't want the unicorns to hear, she says, 'Which is fortunate, because men do not do well in positions of power. A male heir is a last resort. We have not had violence in the Royal House for generations. And for the first time in recorded history we have a man vying for the throne. And how does he plan to do it?' She curls her lip as if she has a bad taste in her mouth. 'By shedding blood.'

Of course, as Chess observes, when she first takes note of the matriarchal structure of the Fae realm, not everyone is happy to live within this power structure, and this is the source of significant tension within the book.

In addition to the unexpected positions of power that women occupy in the novel, female agency also plays out in the way love is explored as a theme.

Chess is unique because although she finds love in the book – in the form of her childhood friend Tom, a kind and handsome shape-shifting unicorn – she chooses duty first. This bucks the trend of forbidden love in fantasy novels and adds a layer of complexity to the choices made by various characters.

Their love is forbidden at first, in a way, because Tom sacrificed his greatest desire – Chess – to perform a powerful cataclysmic spell that would free Chess from the abuse of her foster father. The price he paid for that power was to give up every part of his relationship with her. Once they are reunited, Chess begins to fade, coming closer and closer to death with every moment they spend together.

But by sacrificing herself, Gladys lifts the spell, leaving Chess and Tom free to be together if they choose. Instead, Chess chooses her duty. She doesn't write off their love altogether, but recognises that, for now at least, it must be one or the other. There are parallels here, of course, with the lives of women in contemporary society, who must often choose between a successful career and a family, between being attractive or being powerful.

Making the old new again

One of the challenges with fantasy novels, particularly those which deal with characters that have existed in fairytales and folklore for centuries, is to find a way to make it new.

The Girl Who Fell, which centres on fairies and unicorns (among other mythical beings), finds the unique story by exploring the political tensions and class structure of the Fae, rather than trying to reinvent the well-worn mythology of individual creatures.

'Jules, can I ask you one more thing?'

'As you wish.'

'What does "scaevus" mean?'

Jules sucks in a long, jagged breath, followed by a couple of short ones. When she's composed herself, she spits on the ground.

'An abomination,' she says.

Chess is shocked to discover the callous way the Fae treat those amongst them who are considered abomination. Gladys writes these losses off as a part of the greater good, reminding Chess that Fae don't have the same limiting moral code that humans are encumbered by. But Chess is more like her mother than she realises – she is a woman from a long lineage of women who disrupted the systems of the Fae to right certain wrongs. Chess's humanity, and being forced to fend for herself, is her greatest power, because it allows her to recognise the discord between the privileged lives of those living in the palace, and the wasteland beyond it. Restoring balance, as she sees it, is as much about levelling the playing field within Trinovantum as taking the throne.

'I've been outside the walls of this palace. Beyond this island of privilege and luxury lies a wasteland, a land in ruin. You sit here planning a war, planning the destruction of hundreds, even thousands, of your own as if it's nothing more than a minor inconvenience. For all your planning and councils and talk of war, you're isolated, cut off from the very world you're trying to save. And you pretend it's nature taking its course. But it's not. You have done this. All of you.'

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Discussion points

1. How does Gladys describe matriarchal society as different to patriarchal? Do we live in a matriarchal or patriarchal society? How might our lives be different if we lived in a matriarchal society?
2. It is rare that we see women rise to the heights of having everything – power, family, success, respect, love. Why do you think this is? What does success look like to you? What would you sacrifice to achieve this?
3. As children, we are often presented with images of fairies, unicorns and pixies that are magical and kind, there to help us live out our dreams. But darker strands of the mythology, which *The Girl Who Fell* draws on as the basis for its characters, paints a different picture – of creatures who are self interested and amoral, mischievous at best, harmful at worst. How do the Fae in the book differ from those you encountered as a child? What complexity does this offer the characters and the choices they make?
4. Chess lost her parents as a very young child, and has had a range of other parental-type figures throughout her life – Gladys, Marshall, Larry and Sue. Each of these characters has betrayed her to some extent, and forced Chess to rely only on herself. Discuss the extent of these betrayals – are any better or worse? What is Chess' response when she discovers each? Are any of the characters that betray Chess able to redeem themselves?
5. When Chess first enters Trinovantum and sees the Restoration banners with her face plastered all over them, she wonders 'who do they think I am?' Every character in the novel has a fixed idea of who Chess is and the role she will fulfil. Does Chess get a say in her own destiny? Should she? Is there anyone who sees her for who she truly is?
6. Discuss the differences and similarities between London and Trinovantum (such as the class structure, the palaces, and the political systems).
7. Some characters (such as Agent Weekes) see many of the Fae as evil and abominations, as 'vindictive little bastards.' Even Gladys, when she reveals herself as Fae to Chess for the first time, warns that Fae are 'amoral', but Chess questions this, wondering why Tom would have saved her if he was indifferent to her suffering. Do you think that amoral is a bad thing? Does it mean turning an eye to the suffering of an individual? When/where do we see this sort of 'greater good' mentality come into play? Can you think of examples where it has both positive and negative outcomes?
8. As a child, Tom saves Chess by taking her away from her suffering. As an adult he saves her again. Does this make Chess helpless or weak? What is the power dynamic in her relationship with Tom? Is it equal?
9. From the beginning we see that Chess is a person who is driven to help those people who matter to her. Why do you think this is? What choices does she make that are driven by this desire to help?
10. How important is class in Trinovantum? How does social standing shape the opportunities of each character? How is this similar or dissimilar to the way class creates or removes opportunities in our own reality?
11. What current social and political topics can you see reflected in the book (for example, Gladys tuts at the 'fake news' disseminated around Tom and Chess' escape). How do you feel about external influences such as these being discussed in the book? Should reading ever be purely a means of escape? Why might some people argue that all writing (particularly in contemporary society) is political?
12. Jules is a fascinating character. She is, in many ways, as strong as Chess and has shared similar experiences of being alienated or despised because of who she was born, in knowing the strength of her own mind, and in her tendency to keep her life private. What might Jules' backstory be? How do you think she feels needing to keep her true identity a secret? Have you ever felt unable to be truly yourself? What, if anything, made things different for you? What made Jules realise that she could trust Chess?