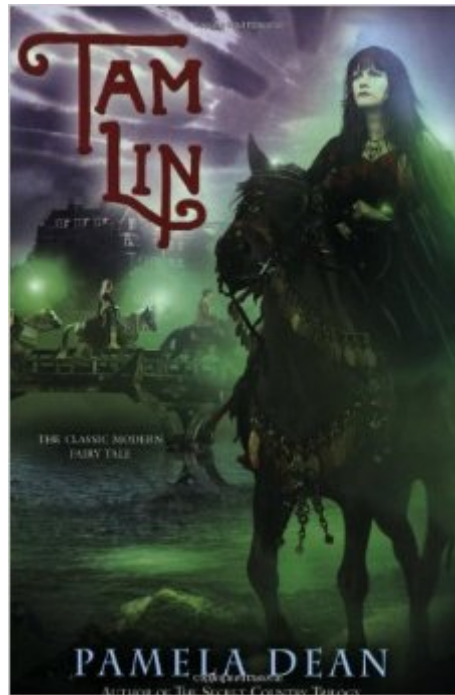


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# Tam Lin



## Synopsis

In the ancient Scottish ballad "Tam Lin," headstrong Janet defies Tam Lin to walk in her own land of Carterhaugh . . . and then must battle the Queen of Faery for possession of her lover's body and soul. In this version of "Tam Lin," masterfully crafted by Pamela Dean, Janet is a college student, "Carterhaugh" is Carter Hall at the university where her father teaches, and Tam Lin is a boy named Thomas Lane. Set against the backdrop of the early 1970s, imbued with wit, poetry, romance, and magic, Tam Lin has become a cult classic "and once you begin reading, you'll know why. This reissue features an updated introduction by the book's original editor, the acclaimed Terri Windling.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (131 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

This book is full of lovely language, subtle references to the ballad of Tam Lin, unadulterated nostalgia for life at a liberal arts college in the 1970s, and characters who are flawed but endearing. I wore out one copy of this book and had to buy a second, which disappeared into a friend's library, so I had to buy a third. I reread it at least once a year, or whenever I want to read a beautifully written book which will reveal more on each successive reading. However, lots of people hate this book. Some of the people who hate this book are people whose literary tastes I otherwise trust implicitly. It's hard to know why they hate it. They say they hate the cardboard characters (but the characters seemed to me to be both wonderful evocations of the archetypes they represented and also quite well-drawn as individuals). They say the book is pretentious (but I went to school with a bunch of people who talked like that -- we outgrew it, but the dialogue sang to me). They say the

fairy tale is just nailed onto the ending of the book (but if you look, the details of the ballad are present from the first page -- and surely one of the things Dean is trying to say is that the fantastic has as its context the mundane). They say the writing is wooden (I disagree). If you love language, if you were ever a somewhat pretentious young intellectual, if you want to remember what it felt like to be 18 years old at a liberal arts college (and you didn't have to go to Carleton to feel the tug of nostalgia), you will probably like this book. But if you don't, you will be in good company.

I rarely give 1-star reviews on this site, because if I've bothered to finish a book it's bound to have some redeeming quality that will at least bring it up to 2. But the best I can say about this one is that it's not offensive--in fact, I share many of the author's opinions--and that the prose was at least competent enough for me to continue reading, but that isn't very redeeming when it so utterly failed to entertain that I threw it against a wall. (I really did!) The (alleged!) premise of this book is that it's a retelling of the fairy tale/ballad of the same name, set in the early 1970's in a small Minnesota liberal arts college. I say "alleged" because the fantasy element is only occasionally hinted at until the last 50 pages or so out of 456. The rest is "Daily Life of an English Major." In fact, over 300 pages describe the protagonist's freshman year, even though the events of the ballad don't happen until she's a senior. And, seriously, nothing happens. But don't just take my word for it. Here's a representative sample: "She put the books she was holding neatly on her lower shelf, shrugged out of her pink nylon jacket and hung it over the back of her desk chair, tucked her gray Blackstock T-shirt into her pink corduroy pants, put the jacket back on, zipped it to just below the Blackstock seal on the T-shirt so that the lion seemed to be peering over the zipper pull, and said, 'Let's go, before the line gets too long.'" And the whole book is like that! Endless minutiae (and bizarre fashion choices), with every little thing described in detail no matter how irrelevant it is. Now, I have nothing against slow pacing; the right author can write a brilliant book consisting almost entirely of minutiae. Read *The Remains of the Day* if you don't believe me. But the difference between that book and this one is that here, the minutiae doesn't mean anything; there's no payoff; it doesn't advance the plot or illuminate the characters or their relationships. It's just endless daily life, the stuff that's moderately interesting to live through but gets boring when even your friends talk about it too long--and how much worse, then, when the people living it are fictional characters? In Tam Lin, we sit through every meeting Janet has with her academic advisor to pick her classes. The merits of various professors and their teaching styles and syllabi are discussed. Every time Janet and her friends want food, we see them weigh which dining hall to eat in (the one with a view of the lake? or the one resembles a dungeon? did I mention that the architecture of generically-named buildings I

could never remember is also much discussed?). And of course, there are the books. Endless discussions of literature--by which I mean, for the most part, old-school poetry and plays--seem to substitute in the author's mind for both plot and character development. In fact, there's so little tension in this book that halfway through, Janet realizes the biggest problem in her life is that one of her roommates, while a perfectly nice girl, doesn't understand Janet's literary obsession. And that Janet therefore finds her tedious. What the....?! Did the author miss the creative writing class where they talked about how a plot requires conflict??SPOILERAnd then we get to the end, and the retelling bit plays out exactly like the ballad, and exactly as Janet was told it would. And then the (alleged!) villain responds with a disapproving stare and exits stage left. I say "alleged" because the most detailed description we ever get of her supposed acts of villainy is basically, "Well, there's a rumor she's slept with a married person sometime." How truly menacing!/SPOILERI could keep going.... the indistinct personalities, the mysteries and foreshadowing that are heavily built up and then come to nothing, the use of unexplained, apparently magically-induced memory loss and general indifference to keep Janet from figuring out the entire (alleged!) plot early on, the dialogue that's probably 50% literary quotes, the 12 pages spent describing a play blow-by-blow, which even then fail to explain it so that it makes sense!.... but in the spirit of what I think Dean was trying to do with this book, I am going to recommend some other books instead. So: if you want to read about college women in the early 1970s, try Nunez's *The Last of Her Kind*. If you want cultlike groups of Classics majors at small-town liberal arts colleges, read Tartt's *The Secret History*. If you like the idea of pretentious college students combined with fantasy elements, try Grossman's *The Magicians*. Or, for less pretention and more coming-of-age, Walton's *Among Others* (okay, I had mixed feelings about that one, but at least it has some plot and character development to go with its science fiction references). And if you're here because you want a fairy tale retelling where the girl saves the guy from an evil sorceress, check out something by Juliet Marillier, preferably *Daughter of the Forest*. But if you really do want to read a book that describes liberal-arts-college life in exhaustive detail and talks endlessly about the sorts of works only an English major could love? Then by all means, read Tam Lin. You can have my copy!

I first read Tam Lin, well, I can't remember when. I've read it over and over since then, though, and each time I pick out new clues, new hints, new allusions, new jokes . . . This is a textbook example of a LAYERED novel. As many other reviewers have pointed out, understanding this book can hinge on a liberal arts education. I had one, I'm happy to say--we even operated on a trimester system, just like Blackstock, the college Janet attends in the novel (which is loosely based on Carleton

College in Minnesota--after reading this book, I seriously considering transferring there). Now. The ending is a bit rushed. I tallied it up once: Janet's freshman year takes up very nearly one half of the book, while her other three years take up progressively fewer pages. The "fairy tale" ending gets a similarly rushed treatment, but I don't think that necessarily detracts from the story as a whole, especially if you're familiar with the Tam Lin ballad--which I wasn't when I first read it, and I still loved it. If you can find it, buy it. This isn't a book to be borrowed from the library and read once--you'll never catch everything. Buy it, read it, read it again, and then read it once more. After a year or so, read it again.

I was disappointed the first time I read this. While it was a very good novel about college life in the early 70s, I wanted to read a novel based on a fairy tale/folk legend. I enjoyed the literary dialogue bantered back and forth among the characters (believe it or not, my friends and I do speak this way; the curse of the overeducated!) Curiosity had me turning back to the book a second time, and suddenly the world I blundered into was much richer. Without having the expectations of gnomes and wishes and magical events that I had the first time, the subtler wonders of this book unfolded. Tiny clues lead up to the suddenly otherworldly ending, ones that can't be understood on the first read-through. Pamela Dean has to be an outstanding wordsmith, to manage to keep me interested through a 10 page description of an uninspiring 17th century play, among other things. The pace may be slow, but it gives you a chance to watch the lovely scenery go by. For that reason, I love this book more every time I read it.

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