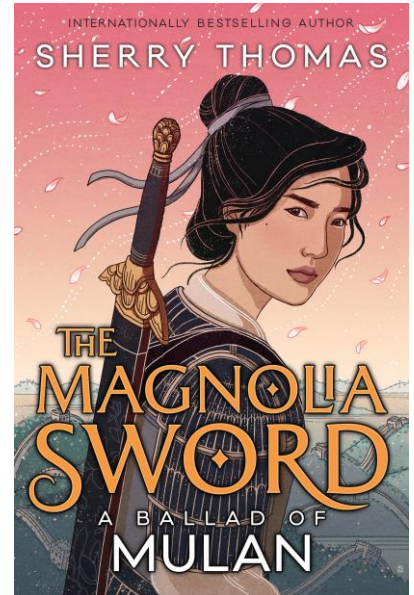


The Magnolia Sword

By Sherry Thomas

November 2019 ISBN 9781760876685
Paperback
Recommended for 13-18-year-olds



Summary

All her life, Mulan has trained for one purpose: to win the duel that every generation in her family must fight. Then a messenger from the Emperor arrives, demanding that all families send one soldier to fight the Rouran invaders in the north. Mulan's paralysed father cannot go, and her brother is just a child, so she ties up her hair, takes up her sword and joins the army as a man.

Thanks to her martial arts skills, Mulan is chosen for an elite team under the command of the princeling, the royal duke's son, to whom she feels a dangerous attraction. But the princeling has secrets of his own, which explode into Mulan's life and shake up everything she knows. As they cross the Great Wall to face the enemy beyond, Mulan and the princeling must find a way to unwind their past, unmask a traitor and uncover the plans for the Rouran invasion...before it's too late.



Inspired by wuxia martial-arts dramas such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, as well as the centuries-old story of Mulan, *The Magnolia Sword* is a thrilling, romantic and sharp-edged novel that lives up to its beloved heroine.

And this Mulan is a very appealing heroine: fearless, skilful and resourceful. The story has thrilling combat and challenge scenes alongside romantic interludes that are appropriate for the younger reader. And Sherry Thomas has researched the book's historical setting—China in the 5th century AD—thoroughly, with the language/voice reading authentically to time and place but in an accessible way. While a long way from Disney's *Mulan*, *The Magnolia Sword* captures the same essence of the stirring female-focused tale, albeit far more developed, nuanced and satisfying.

Use in the curriculum

Using *The Magnolia Sword* as a class text would lead to invaluable discussions regarding life in ancient China, legends and the role of women. It is suggested that *The Magnolia Sword* be studied:

As an **English** text:

- as an example of historical fiction;
- as an example of a first-person narrative;

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- as an example of a fictionalised piece of writing based on a historical or mythological figure.
- as a basis for a detailed piece of work on how life in 5th century China compares to life today.

In **Humanities/SOSE** classes as an adjunct to the study of China, role of women, war, legends and female warriors.

Other texts to support the study of *The Magnolia Sword* could include the Disney film *Mulan*, the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the picture book *The Legend of Mu Lan: A Heroine of Ancient China* by Jiang Wei (Victory Press, 1997), the fantasy YA novels *Throne of Jade* (Temeraire #2) by Naomi Novik (HarperCollins, 2007) and *Alanna: The first adventure* by Tamora Pierce (Scholastic Australia 2007) and Pierce's edited collection of short stories, *Young Warriors: Stories of Strength* (Scholastic Press/Random House, 2006).

Themes

- martial arts
- girls disguised as boys
- historical fiction
- China

Discussion questions

1) The novel opens *in medias res*, a literary device which translates from the Latin to 'into the middle of things'.

- In your own words explain how this device is used in Chapter 1 and why you think the author decided to begin the story with it.

2) Chapter 2 begins:

Only seven left.

I am to catch forty-nine pebbles Father fires at me, hit forty-nine targets he indicates around the courtyard, and intercept forty-nine projectiles in midair with projectiles of my own. All while blindfolded. (p. 11)

- The author of *The Magnolia Sword* chose to infuse the story with wuxia, a uniquely Chinese literary genre featuring martial arts and feats of superhuman prowess. Why do you think she chose to do this, and do you think her choice made the novel a more or a less interesting reading experience?

Extension Question: In what way is Mulan a typical wuxia hero? Are there any aspects of her character that make her stand out from the traditional wuxia hero?

3) 'Master Yu, the Wall looks mighty, but how useful is it?'

Yu glances about to make sure we can't be overheard. 'Beyond these mountains lies a great desert. If an army has marched past the desert and through the mountains, a wall will not make them turn back.' (p. 135)

- Read the following National Geographic article, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2016/03-04/the-great-wall-of-china/>, and answer these questions:
 - Who was the Wall meant to keep out?
 - Was Master Yu correct in his estimation of the Wall's military benefits?
 - Other than the Wall, what other methods proved useful when keeping invaders out of China?
 - What contemporary situations mirror some of the issues around the construction and assumed benefits of the Great Wall of China? Does your



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greater understanding of the history of the Wall impact on your ideas about the current situations?

- 4) *The migratory birds are returning to their northern home, even though winter squats on in these lands, refusing to be fully evicted.* (p. 198)
- Name the two literary techniques present in this sentence. [*Answer: metaphor and anthropomorphism.*]
 - Make up a sentence of your own featuring these two techniques.
- 5) *I hardly know where to look. I have held the exact same view of the Xianbei, a casual yet ingrained contempt that I never questioned until a few days ago. Until then I wasn't even aware of my prejudice, let alone that it might be wrong.* (p. 194)

What prejudice is Mulan referring to here and what occurs in the novel to change her view? Do Mulan's beliefs change in other ways during the course of her journey?

- 6) *'So don't be so certain that your father will always maintain an obdurate silence. He is not the same person he was last year or last month. None of us are.'* (p. 248)
- Write a brief description of how the princeling's aunt and Mulan's father change their attitudes about the importance of the duel. In your answer make sure you outline their original feelings, why they felt that way, how their feelings change, and the cause of that change.
- 7) Retell the story from the viewpoint of either Mulan's father, Master Hua, or the princeling. In your telling describe how your attitude to Mulan changes over the course of the year.
- 8) *The dagger is small, from hilt to tip barely longer than my forearm. I test its weight and balance, then stow it in my boot. "Scared?"...We both laugh a little.* (p. 267)
- The princeling is terrified of wolves and of being alone in the dark, while Mulan fears she will fail in battle after her encounter with the bandits. How do both characters differ from heroes in more traditional stories and, in your opinion, does this make them more or less heroic?
- 9) The author says that this version of Mulan proved to be 'a timely exploration of whose voices are heard and whose stories get told'.
- What do you think she meant by this statement? In your answer describe events from the story, as well as discussions about history, and who gets to write the 'correct' version of it.
- Extension Question:** Sherry Thomas's use of the word 'timely' suggests that understanding this concept is important today. In what way might it be important to today's world?

In the author's own words

(edited version from the Author's Note at the back of the novel):

'I realised I knew next to nothing about China in the fifth century AD, when the story of Mulan is most commonly inferred to have taken place.... So I set out to learn about the time period. And what I learned challenged, even upended, many of my own notions of what it means to be Chinese...

Northern Wei, the dynastic time and place where the ballad of Mulan is typically assumed to have occurred, was one of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. It was founded by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei tribe, one of the nomadic peoples that had settled in northern China centuries earlier.

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In discovering this, I realised that the north of China—and the south, too, with its indigenous peoples—was far more diverse than I'd supposed...China had been quite the melting pot. (The founder of the Tang Dynasty, often considered the pinnacle of Chinese civilisation, was himself half-Xianbei).

'[I also realised] that the age-old story of Mulan can actually be a timely exploration of whose voices are heard and whose stories get told.

'That a girl who goes to war and finds her courage can at the same time unlearn ingrained biases and unpack her own assumptions.

'All of which made writing *The Magnolia Sword* one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, and for that I could not be happier.'

—Sherry Thomas

The author

Sherry Thomas is the author of nineteen novels across multiple genres, including the acclaimed Lady Sherlock mystery series, a YA fantasy trilogy that began with *The Burning Sky* and more than a dozen romance novels, which have twice won her the Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award. Born in China, she learned English as a second language and now lives and writes in Austin, Texas.



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