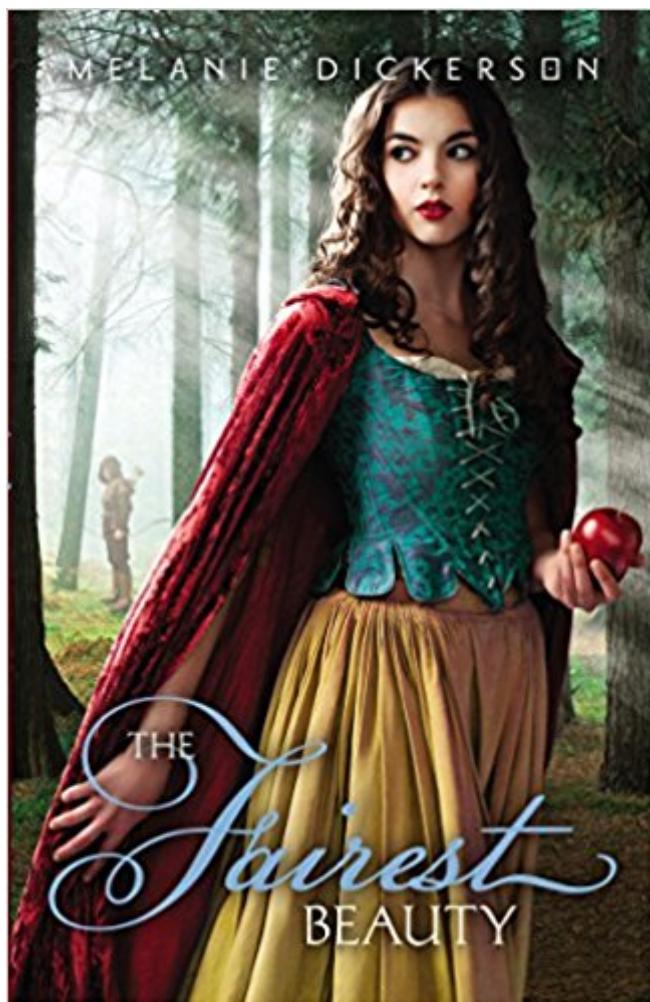


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The Fairest Beauty (Fairy Tale Romance Series)



Synopsis

A daring rescue. A difficult choice. Sophie desperately wants to get away from her stepmother's jealousy, and believes escape is her only chance to be happy. Then a young man named Gabe arrives from Hagenheim Castle, claiming she is betrothed to his older brother, and everything twists upside down. This could be Sophie's one chance at freedom—but can she trust another person to keep her safe? Gabe defied his parents Rose and Wilhelm by going to find Sophie, and now he believes they had a right to worry: the girl's inner and outer beauty has enchanted him. Though romance is impossible—she is his brother's future wife, and Gabe himself is betrothed to someone else—he promises himself he will see the mission through, no matter what. When the pair flee to the Cottage of the Seven, they find help—but also find their feelings for each other have grown. Now both must not only protect each other from the dangers around them—they must also protect their hearts.

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Customer Reviews

This well-crafted retelling of the Snow White story leaves out magic and potions, substituting instead, human emotions, faults and strengths, and romance in the post-medieval setting. Sophie, raised as a scullery maid in the residence of a power-hungry duchess, is rescued by Gabe, the brother of the man to whom she unknowingly was betrothed as an infant. Dickerson develops

Sophie and Gabe carefully, skillfully showing how their relationship moves from shyness and distrust to guilt over their increasing devotion and the eventual release of Sophie from the early betrothal to Gabe's brother. Especially imaginative is the rendering of the group familiarly known as the Seven Dwarfs, although here they are known as the Seven, and each has his own physical or intellectual challenge as well as skill. Solid storytelling, cleverly woven references to the folktale, and historical detail combine in a novel that is a likely popular choice for girls in search of gentle romance. Grades 5-8. --Francisca Goldsmith

Melanie Dickerson is a New York Times bestselling author and two-time Christy Award finalist. Her first book *The Healer's Apprentice* won the National Readers' Choice Award for Best First Book in 2010, and *The Merchant's Daughter* won the 2012 Carol Award.

Melanie spends her time writing stories at her home near Huntsville, Alabama, where she lives with her husband and two daughters.

When young Gabe hears that his brother's betrothed, long thought dead, is living as a mistreated scullery maid in her stepmother's castle, he recklessly sets off alone on a quest to free her. Never mind that his brother is a tournament champion and Gabe has never been that interested in training and competitions; this is his chance to show that he's just as valiant as Valten. Surely infiltrating Duchess Ermengard's home and whisking away one maid can't be that difficult. Having grown up believing she is an orphan, Sophie tries to be an expert at pleasing the exacting and cruel Duchess Ermengard, but often finds herself punished for the most minor infractions. Life seems hopeless in Hohendorf, as the Duchess never lets anyone leave and rarely do any new visitors come to the castle. When a well-dressed troubadour mysteriously appears, claiming to want to sing the praises of Duchess Ermengard, everyone is suspicious that he is not who he claims to be. At first I had a hard time getting into this story. Gabe seems far too irresponsible and thoughtless, and Sophie didn't seem like she had much of a personality. But as the story progressed I realized Sophie seemed one-dimensional because the abuse she had suffered robbed her of any joy or spark of individuality. It was once she realized that she was valued and that she could hope for a better future that she began coming alive. You can't overestimate the work of hope in an oppressive situation! Gabe goes through tremendous character growth, too, as he realizes that this quest to save Sophie isn't a lark, but rather a truly dangerous situation which will require strength and sacrifice if either of them are to survive. This story includes lots of classic "Snow White" references, including the huntsman ordered to kill Sophie, the seven unusual men who offer shelter to our main

characters when they desperately need it, and a poisoned apple which threatens every hope of a happy ending. Even though Gabe and Sophie are mindful of the fact that she is betrothed to Valten, a bond quickly forms between them as they work together to secure the future which Duchess Ermengard has tried to steal from her. My favorite part of this novel was seeing Sophie's faith carry her through. When she realizes that the Duchess is actually her stepmother and all that has been taken away from her through evil intentions, she doesn't let despair or hate take over her heart. With the encouragement of others, she is able to actively choose to let God do His healing work in her. It's not an instantaneously healing, but rather a choice each time she is hurting to embrace God rather than anger. Watching her, Gabe also realizes that he can accept God's healing in various ways in his life, too. These kinds of lessons are ones I love seeing because they meet us right where we are. God wants to work in our lives so that our struggles and sorrows bring us closer to Him, but we can easily get in the way and shut Him out. Purposefully being open to His love, mercy, and grace is something we can all choose, giving Him a chance to do a transforming work in us.

I love fairy tale re-tellings. There is just something about knowing the old story, yet reading it in a fresh new style. Dickerson definitely delivers that with *The Fairest Beauty*. Having read her first two books, I have to say that I enjoyed this one the most. The plot was more fast moving and more adventuresome than how I remember the first two. There were definitely big things at stake, which lent a more urgency to the story. What keeps it from bumping it up to five stars is that some of the characters just didn't have enough depth for me. Sophie is nearly perfect - she's beautiful, always kindhearted (even in her thoughts toward the evil duchess who is trying to kill her!) and just wasn't someone I could always relate with. Some of her decisions were way too naive - I wanted more of a twist with the "old woman" and apple scenario. It was very Disney-esque. Now, for the fairy tale aspect, I suppose that it makes sense that she is kind and perfect and good, but at times it was a bit much. I liked Gabe much more! He was endearing, impulsive, foolhardy, stubborn and all-around likable - there were real flaws there and that made him realistic in a way that Sophie never becomes for me. There are also a couple of plot points that come across as devices instead of naturally occurring in the story, and the ending was very "deus ex machina." Something just happens to make everything easier on the characters, and I thought it just came across as too convenient. Despite these two issues, I still had fun reading this story. I loved the "Seven," and the way she twists the seven dwarfs idea around a bit with their different characteristics. They weren't cookie-cutter with the different characteristics, which I really loved. The romance is also really sweet, and I thought it was very well-done. While it might have been shorter compared to other

stories, it fit in well with the fairy tale element. I found the family aspect of the story to be well-done too. Gabe & Sophie have to realize that their actions have consequences not only for them but also for their family, and the way they rise to occasion when this happens is admirable. They draw strength from their faith without the spiritual elements coming across as preachy. It felt very natural within the story. It was also neat to see the characters from The Healer's Apprentice at the end of the story - it was a very subtle connection, but fun if you've read the first book. I don't think it would be a problem to read this one first though as no plot-points of the previous book are given away. I realize that I'm not technically the intended audience for this book - I'd imagine a young teen girl probably would have no problem with the things in which I found issue. Even so, I loved this for being a light, fun fairy tale with characters that had many admirable, endearing qualities.

I was expecting more and was disappointed. I am happy this is a clean book, but had difficult in adapting to the hero and heroine. It was a Tale of Snow White but a brother going after another brothers betroth in a christian novel did not seat right with me. "Sophie the heroine desperately wanted to escape her stepmother's jealousy, but had no where to go and believe she was an orphan. Then Gabe arrives from Hagenheim Castle, claiming she is betrothed to his older brother, and everything twists upside down. Gabe defied his parents And brother Valten by going to find Sophie, and now he believes they had a right to worry: the girl's inner and outer beauty has enchanted him. Though romance is impossible" - she is his brother's future wife, and Gabe himself is betrothed to someone else" - he promises himself he will see the mission through, no matter what. When the pair flee to the Cottage of the Seven, they find help" - but also find their feelings for each other have grown. Now both must not only protect each other from the dangers around them" - they must also protect their hearts. "I find it hard to like Gabe's character, he knew that Sophie had insecurities yet I think he use those same insecurities to make her for in love with him. I felt that he compromise her in more ways then one. Gabe was also betroth to someone else. Sophie who was do innocence and sweet did not even give Valten a chance, she was cold towards him. The Healer's Apprentice was a better book by far, I found to many things wrong with this book to put it into words.

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