



Priestess of Avalon

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Priestess of Avalon, which Marion Zimmer Bradley had half completed when she died in 1999, is a prequel to *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), her best-selling feminist reworking of Arthurian legend. Using her usual blend of fantasy and history, Bradley attempts in this last installment to explore how Christianity came to ancient Britain by focusing on Princess Eilan, daughter of the high priestess of Avalon, the seat of the Old Religion, which worships the pagan Goddess. When her mother dies giving birth to her, however, Eilan's father raises her in the manner of the occupying Romans, and only later does she return to Avalon to learn the rites of the Goddess still observed throughout Britannia. It is there that she falls in love with a Roman officer destined for greatness. Her unsanctioned union with Constantius results both in Eilan's banishment from Avalon and in the birth of Constantine, the future emperor of Rome.

Eilan—now bearing the Roman name Flavia Helena Augusta—remains Constantius's consort throughout his military career, only to be jettisoned for another, more suitable woman when Constantius becomes the new caesar. Helena, who then retires to Britannia, comes to Rome after her son becomes Constantine the Great, the bringer of Christianity to the Empire. At the end of her life, the priestess of Avalon journeys to the Holy Land in an effort to understand this new religion, which she then promotes by establishing churches in her role as Empress-Mother.

Diana Paxson, a talented fantasy writer in her own right, was Bradley's writing partner, and she completed *Priestess of Avalon* after Bradley's death. Unfortunately, the product of this final collaboration is far from seamless and makes for a rather leaden end to this popular series.

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