

An interview with *Gray Magic* author Sarah Neff

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Sliding in between Webtoons' "Fantasy" and "Action" canvas genres — bucking the very recognizable stylistic trends of both those categories — comes *Gray Magic*, Seattle-based narrative illustrator Sarah Neff's thoughtful and unorthodox take on the classic Dungeons & Dragons campaign comic.

The first trend Neff's bucking: *Don't call it that.*



"I don't want this to be a D&D comic," Neff said. "I want to avoid any linear D&D comparisons. The characters and their actions have roots in their D&D categories, classes and all that, sure. But this is a heavily home-brewed, original story."

A story rooted, nonetheless, in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign Neff began nearly three years ago as a rising senior at the University of Michigan's Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design. What began as a fairly straightforward D&D "Forgotten Realms" campaign with pals soon found itself branching and evolving into something quite different. The story was building in excitement, but also nuance. Tropes and character categories bent, blended as the players grew into their roles. Some rules, frankly, went out the window. The hardened lines of dark and light that often characterize classic D&D were blurring.

Graying.

To veteran storyteller Neff, a story worth telling was beginning to emerge.

"As the story begins, there's a lot of division - a lot of ideological polar opposites," Neff said. Magic, a staple of the D&D universe, has been pronounced illegal and culturally taboo. "Arcanists" still wander around, occasionally practicing it. A Guild has been deputized to put a stop to this.

"But, good guys and bad guys? That's too linear, isn't it?" Neff said. "Everyone tends to think they're doing the right thing, even if their motivation may be unclear to someone else."

"Sure, you'll have 'white magic,' 'black magic,'" she said. "But life takes its course through the gray areas."

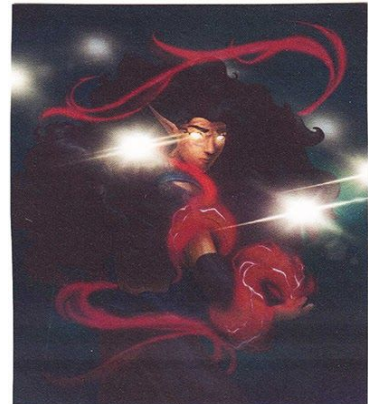




Who's the true main character on this journey through Neff's ambiguous world? That isn't clear in the early chapters, as several strong personalities step forward together. Her own character in the campaign that spawned the comic, however, was the young medical intern Maude Blackthorne. The opening moves of the story, it quickly becomes clear, are coming to you through Maude's bookish, somewhat naive eyes.

"You're meeting a very young person," Neff said. "She's 22. She's a small-town doctor, she's never really had a lot of friends, the world is a very large place to her. Of all the characters you're meeting here, she may be the least experienced."

A potentially spoiler-y flip through some of the production sketches from later *Gray Magic* chapters nods in one direction Neff's story will take. Nestled in the sketchbooks: An almost terrifying rendering of a later, more powerful version of Maude, wreathed in swirls of ectoplasmic flame, her expressive, childlike doe eyes now blank, glaring embers.



The opening chapters of *Gray Magic* are deliberately curtailed, her character exposition building in a murky world where magic, as Dungeons and Dragons players may know it, is both outlawed and omnipresent; often well-intentioned, yet darkly, deadly dangerous. There's purpose in this ambiguity, though. And according to the author, the narrative lines she's drawing out of it will be bold. Not so gray, after all.