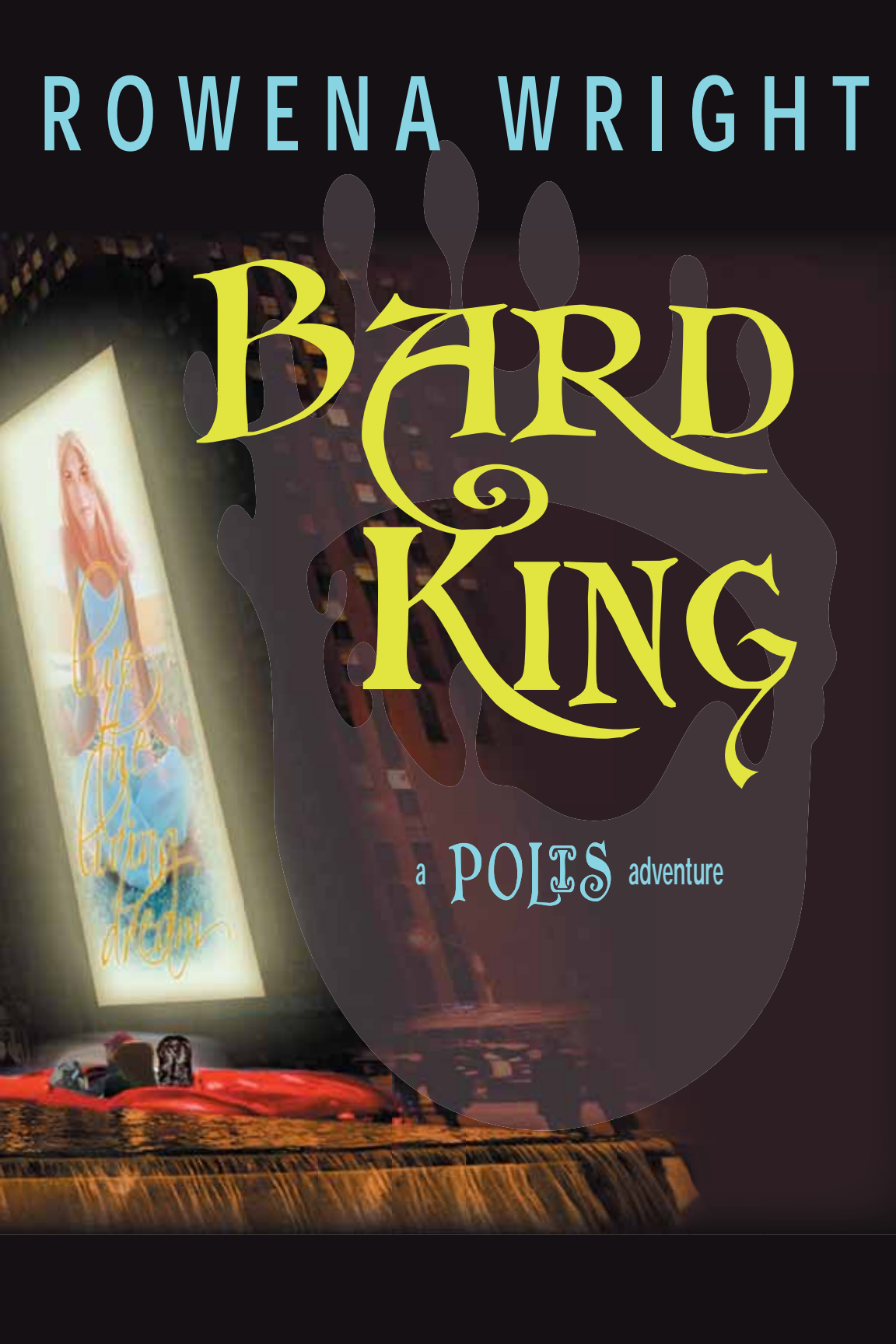


ROWENA WRIGHT

# BARD KING

a POLTS adventure



for my mother  
who always protected us

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City, London, and the Quinotaur Exchange as Ericca Ludwig and her friends  
Elle and Matt combat the forces protecting the petroleum economy and the  
age of the rulers.

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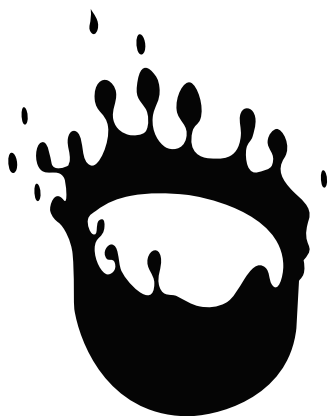
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ROWENA WRIGHT



BARD  
KING

POETS O TWO

FINIAL

## Praise for the Polis adventures

“Much of the beauty and excitement portrayed is based on hard, earth-bound, science, but you are not reading science-fiction. Anyone with a sense of wonder, curiosity and imagination will be engaged by the weaving of the many literary vines.”

—Beth Ellen McKenzie, myshelf.com

“The writing is clear and elegant. You could draw favorable comparisons between *A Loop in Time* and the Harry Potter series as well as Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. All of these books feature misunderstood, talented youths and fanciful distortions of time and space. More than anything, however, *A Loop in Time* reminds me of *Alice in Wonderland*, which is high praise indeed.”

—Karm, snortville.com

“...[the characters] serve as literary archetypes, hearkening back to figures of mythology and folklore...a clever novel written by an author with a great future ahead of her.”

—Douglas R. Cobb, curledupkids.com

“...the relatively dense amount of material makes [*A Loop in Time*] beefy, filled with soul, and something I can recommend without reservation. The book itself is well done, the cover being beautiful, and the subject is something you are not going to find anywhere else.”

—Alex Ness, popthought.com

“*A Loop in Time* is more than a science fiction novel meant to entertain young adults with its complicated yet intriguing storyline...”

—Jeremy Stafford, feministreview.org

“Intriguing... [Wright's] style is poetic and descriptive.”

—Dotsy Harland,

VOYA Voice of Youth Advocates

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# POETS

## the Beginning...

In eons long ago the earth was frozen and dark. All was a harsh wasteland devoid of life except for creatures specially adapted to the environment. This was the time of the early ages of the Ringgolds, of the seers of the third age, named for the prescience and night vision that enabled their survival.

Later ages of Ringgolds would follow. In the fourth age, the builders open the crystal time tunnels and the great stone plazas. In the fifth age, the makers bring magical shadow relics to the market. The makers pioneer parthenogenesis, or virgin birth, and populate the earth with wondrous living things. The makers of the fifth age establish their headquarters in the Parthenon located in the high city known as the Acropolis.

In the sixth age, a line of humans derived from Ringgolds called Saplings emerges in great numbers, and with that their heroes. In the seventh age, rulers rule with the help of a magical media umbrella, driving the Sapling masses to great military and economic endeavors. The Ringgolds fade, but they continue to gather in such ancient hidden venues as the time tunnels and the Quinotaur Exchange while living on the surface as regular humans.

But the age of the rulers approaches its prophesied end; the gray petroleum economy will end; the rulers will fall. The eighth age heralds a great change, and a great adventure wherein modern day angst meets ancient magic.

PART ONE

VIRGIN

RAIN

## VIRGIN RAIN

# 1

The living dream is over

Ericca Ludwig peered closely at the screen. Her glance strayed around the room to the clouded windows and peeling paint. But glancing at her watch, she became anxious and she turned again to the screen. Period, she thought. The living dream is over, period. But the period key was stuck. "What idiot stuck gum in the keyboard?" she muttered to herself.

Seething with impatience, she stared around the room with suspicion. She met the eyes of a boy hunched over a computer across the room. He winked at her. She recognized him as her friend Miguel. But from his look of concentration she could tell he was in no mood for fun.

She picked at the dried wad of gum under the period key. The dirty residue of dried gum under her fingernail had a strong smell.

Yuck, she thought, smells like a potent brew of dried pheromones and nail product. She glanced at her watch and cursed the keyboard once again.

The screen blinked. Her personal toolbar in the upper corner flashed with the new mail icon. She clicked the icon and smiled to herself as she read the message:

The living dream has no end.

Below the message, the signature of the sender read:

Branch Archer

Keeper of the Reserve

The Terroir of Distilled Spirits

Number Eight Quinotaur Exchange

Ericca was not surprised. Messages from the Reserve were getting to be a regular thing. She typed a reply.

Where are you?

## PART ONE

She had barely hit the enter key when neon words streamed across the screen:

Ascertaining the quality of the reserves at the wine cellar of the famous Reserve restaurant, of course. Where are you?

Ericca scowled. She and her mother barely scraped by on her mother's single income while her father, a political exile, worked as a sommelier in a fine European restaurant, a choice that apparently was not entirely without its perks. She tapped a reply.

At school finishing my paper before Elle gets me for the Mermaid Ball

She smirked at her own words, unnecessary information. Her father, Branch Archer, knew what she was typing on the keyboard. He most probably knew where she was.

Oh, yes, the Mermaid Ball, wish I could be there. Send my highest regards to your mother, my regrets to our world leaders...and watch out for Nicholas Bard.

Ericca dwelled on the last phrase. Nicholas Bard was her next door neighbor and also her father's squadron mate during his last fateful air mission in the Tunnel Wars, a mission from which her father never returned.

The thought of Nicholas Bard and her father's military service brought to mind newspaper stories splattered with her father's stalwart Air Force photo and headlines like: Famous Architect Flouts Military Duty. Thirteen years ago, her father had survived a fiery midair explosion only to face the censure of the military and the press, and political exile.

Glancing around the room, she was glad she attended a public school. Here at P.S. #33 in West Manhattan, the working class kids were too busy to notice or care that she was the daughter of Branch Archer, the shamed national hero and conscientious

## VIRGIN RAIN

objector. Your family's fame, infamy, status and money, or lack of it, were simply non-issues. There were more important things.

Ericca glanced back to the open document and typed:

Gotta go, paper due

The neon blue tulip that symbolized the Reserve faded from the screen, and Ericca looked around again while punching the period key in frustration.

The types who hung around the computer lab after school were all studious types from places like Albania and Cambodia. There was no one to pin her ire upon. They were all the types like Miguel, good students from working class families huddled around the workstations, oblivious to the cracked laminate desktops or the nasty words scratched on the desk edges. She thought to exchange her keyboard for someone else's, but every computer was taken.

Arghh, thought Ericca glancing at her watch. At 4:30 today Elle was supposed to pick her up, and it was now already 3:55. This was the last day for submitting applications for admission to Manhattan's most elite public high schools. As she read her application, she thought, This was ridiculous. No student had ever been admitted to the ultra-competitive Stuyvescent school with an essay riddled with run-on sentences. She peered again at what she had written.

Living habitats like today's coral are dying under environmental pressures and with them die the fossil genes of ancient creatures of the deep; a shadow falls over the living dream

Suddenly there was a loud whoosh. Ericca was startled.

The door swung open. Blaring boom box in hand, a crowd of students slunk into the room with bright sneakers and the latest street funk clothes hanging from their lanky frames.

"Hey, Ludwig, working on your cracker glow?"

Ericca smirked. Cracker, the slang for white person. Not

## PART ONE

entirely accurate in this case because Ericca was not white, more like luminescent.

“No kidding, bro’, lookin’ gangsta today,” replied Ericca.

She knew she had said something cool; looking gangsta was always a high compliment. After nearly ten years in the public school system of New York City, she was always ready with a smart comeback. She never let the homeboys get to her.

Besides she got along with them and she liked them. They had better music than the preppies, and every one of them always had on immaculate basketball shoes with matching athletic togs, no matter what their parents did for a living or whether they had any money. What a country!

Besides, the homeboys had perfected, indeed invented the higher art of street English and were destined for something even preppies envied: hip-hop stardom. The honor implicit in being someone’s “homey” was something the preppies would never understand much less invent. They preferred titles that conveyed status and power, like doctor, president, king. Crackers were like that.

She returned to cursing the computer. While everyone else in the room agonized over the last details of their Stuyvescent application, the homeboys and their group assembled in the corner. Their boom box was turned down a notch.

Over the muted bass beat, there was the hum of computers and keyboards clicking, and then suddenly, a loud whoosh and a chorus of soft wails, and then a low rumble from the bowels of the earth.

A shiver ran down Ericca’s spine. Odd, she thought, there were no subway lines under the school. No one else in the room had even blinked. The sound was like cats being strangled in the halls of their school. These were sounds that even the focused students in the room should have noticed.

The rumble amplified until the entire building shook. Ericca

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looked around in alarm, expecting to see cracks in the old windows and swinging lights. Earthquakes were not known in New York City. But if they were, old buildings like her school would surely crumble, burying everyone alive.

No one else was alarmed. Despite the noise, the room showed no sign of disturbance. Ericca wondered, Could it be that I am the only one to hear this? Could it be that only Ringgolds detect these vibrations?

Increasingly Ericca was learning what it meant to be a Ringgold. The Ringgolds were a society of ancient immortals. To be a Ringgold meant strange things happened. You could travel through time and access a library with the collected archives of all time. Literally, all time. You could also have conversations with dead philosophers. But that was all really, or so she thought.

Being a Ringgold would not help her get into a decent high school or have a chance at a decent job. Especially not when there were kids like her friends Elle and Matt all over the city, attending exclusive private schools where the tuition alone was more than her mother's entire annual salary, schools where the keyboards actually worked.

Heck, at Elle's school, the private Acropolis School, every student had their own state-of-the-art laptop and a matching monogrammed leather folio. Rumor was the finest fatty tuna was flown in for cultural Fridays.

The rumbling subsided and Ericca returned to look again at the computer screen. Her essay was unreadable. Tears welling and suppressing an urge to throw the keyboard, she began inserting a question mark everywhere a period belonged. Sobbing to herself and mad at the world, she again heard the sound of wailing. But now the sound was clearer and louder.

In the corner of the room, the boom box played the latest song from a favorite R&B diva. The seductive purring from the boom box alternated with a lilting chant from the depths

## PART ONE

of the earth. Very strange, thought Ericca, while poking at the keyboard and scrolling down the screen. The words of the chant were now audible:

Phantasos is dead.

The living dream is over.

As she typed, the singing grew louder and louder building into a symphony of untold voices. Suddenly as if from a distant place, she heard a voice, "Hey, Ludwig, you be flossin', check out that tricked-out e-class outside."

Ericca panicked. Elle was outside waiting in her dad's collector Cobra car, a gorgeous red convertible with a polished birds-eye walnut dashboard. Totally flossin', totally dripping money, totally e-class. No doubt Elle was sitting in the leather seats of the tricked-out convertible wondering why Ericca at the age of thirteen still did not have a cellphone.

Ericca muttered thank you while overcome by panic. Her essay was not done. It was due today by midnight, along with the other application material for high school. Her essay would be compared to everyone else's, including those from kids whose parents didn't speak English but still managed to put together awesome essays. She cursed the keyboard again.

In a flash of inspiration, she opened the compose e-mail window, typed in Elle's e-mail address, and a message:

*gotta finish this*

She attached her unfinished essay as an e-mail attachment and clicked send. Scrambling to gather her bag, she hurried out the room, down the drab hallway and out the dinged metal doors.

Just as predicted, Elle was in a gleaming red sports car parked at the curb. Waving and running to the car, Ericca glimpsed a leather folio casually thrown in the backseat with the embossed logo for the Acropolis School, followed by the embossed initials, EMN standing for Elle M. Nix. She sighed with relief. Elle had

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her laptop with her and, with any luck, Ericca would borrow it to finish her paper tonight.

But there was something unusual. The usual, casually dressed Elle was wearing a dress that at first glance resembled those low cut gowns ubiquitous in entertainment television and reality TV dating shows. Her freckled shoulders glowed under the few remaining rays of sunshine as she sat in the driver's seat unperturbed by the already oppressive humidity of late June. What was more alarming was that Elle was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Elle, sorry to make you wait," apologized Ericca, still confounded by how glamorous Elle looked.

"That's OK," replied Elle. She gave another lingering glance to the newspaper she had been reading.

Ericca immediately recognized the periodical as the Tunnel Times, a newspaper devoted to the goings-on of prominent members of Ringgold society. Ericca glimpsed a headline with a picture of a pretty girl with curly blonde hair: Tory Skye Dumped: Pharaoh Hooks Up with R&B Diva Keisha. Below that was another headline: Timpani Jewelers Acquires Rare Gem Collection.

"Where's your dad?" asked Ericca sliding into the front seat. She had expected Elle's dad to be driving.

"He decided I could drive a few blocks on my own," explained Elle, "Besides, the Cobra car practically drives itself." She laughed knowingly. At sixteen, being granted access to the Cobra car was like winning a medal, and she couldn't help crowing over this new privilege. She tossed her hair back and checked her seatbelt.

Ericca returned a look of understanding. That was another perk of being a Ringgold: awesome vehicles, capable of traveling through space-time.

With a roar, the Cobra car jetted out of the parking space and

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within minutes Elle was carefully backing the car into a parking spot in the middle of Bryant Park. “We were told to use the service entrance for the library,” explained Elle. Then gathering the newspaper into a large floral bag, she headed toward the service entry door. Ericca followed with her own backpack and Elle’s folio, trudging in the heat. This Mermaid Ball was sure to be something. Hopefully she would manage to miss most of it.

## 2

Elle’s shimmering aquamarine dress was very out of place in the dark, dusty service hallway. Strolling behind her, Ericca was glad for her own cracked sneakers and frayed jeans.

But after a short segment of smudged beige walls, they arrived at a spiral stair.

But this was no ordinary stair. The treads were of feathery white pumice and spiraled around a blue glass tube. As Ericca descended the stair, she noticed bright lights streaming inside the tube and flashes of aquamarine. On her way down, there were landings labeled with arrows: To the Quinotaur Exchange and the Eternal Spring, To the Butterfly Pool, To Skye Tower and the Acropolis Fund.

After a dizzying descent, Elle stopped at an arched doorway carved from limestone with intricate swirling designs. They entered a cavernous room and stopped to catch a breath.

In this nearly empty room, a slight figure approached. “Elle, Ericca, so glad to see you here,” greeted a wizened old woman in an impeccable suit from across the room.

Ericca immediately wished she had brushed her hair and showered that day. The woman approaching them was Quintana Castle in her signature black jacket and skirt combo. She was

...a provocative fantasy thriller from the critically acclaimed author of A LOOP IN TIME

**T**error and nightmare lurk in an adventure through New York City, London, and the Quinotaur Exchange as Ericca Ludwig and her friends Elle and Matt combat the forces protecting the petroleum economy and the age of the rulers.

Environmentalism and global politics mix in this thrilling adventure featuring teen romances, a Byronic hero, and the festival of the Burning Man.

**POLIS**

polis: a city state  
politics  
policy  
police  
metropolis

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