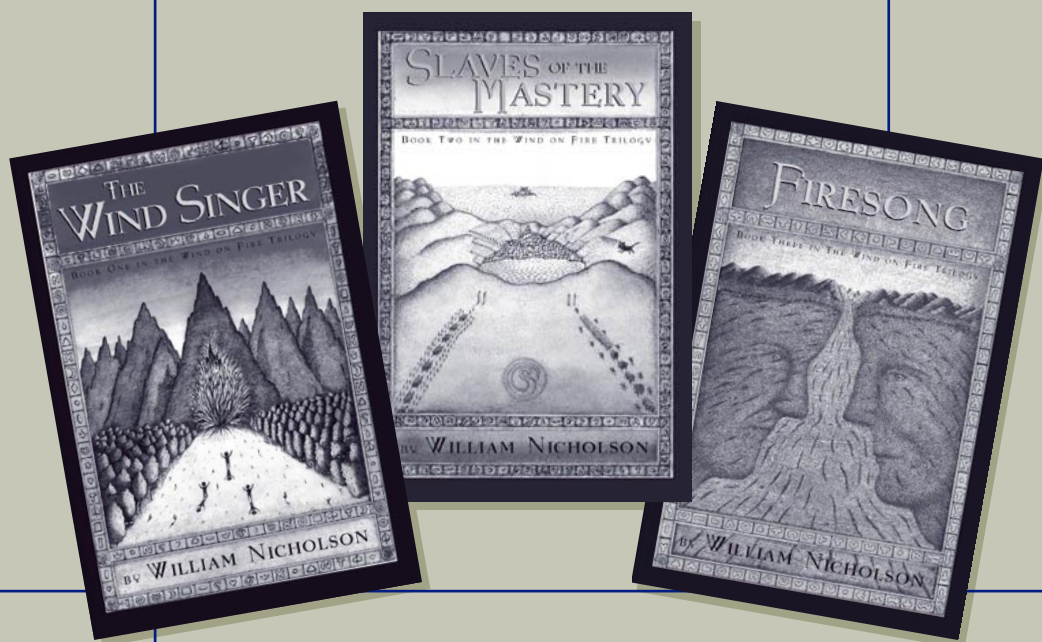


# THE WIND ON FIRE TRILOGY:

The Wind Singer, Slaves of the Mastery, Firesong

by William Nicholson



A READERS' COMPANION

**HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN**

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*“The song of the Wind Singer will set you free.  
Then seek the homeland.”*

In this masterful fantasy trilogy, William Nicholson ranges from delightfully inventive characters and societies reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz* to social and theological insights comparable to those of Lois Lowry in *The Giver* or Philip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. In the first volume, Nicholson raises some provocative questions relevant to our own society about the destructiveness of competition and ranking, but makes his points with humor and suspense. The second volume becomes more serious as the children grow into thoughtful teens with romantic interests, and the plot explores the contradiction of freedom and social order; but always within the framework of an action-filled story. And the third volume brings it all to a soaring and mystical conclusion, with a satisfying epilogue to complete the stories of Hanno and Ira; Bowman, Kestrel, and Sisi; Mumpo and Pinto; Creoth and Mist; and all the other entrancing characters in this awe-inspiring trilogy.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

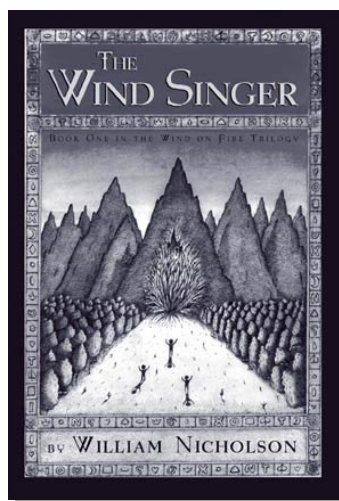
<b>BOOK ONE: THE WIND SINGER</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>BOOK TWO: SLAVES OF THE MASTERY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>BOOK THREE: FIRESONG</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>A TALK WITH WILLIAM NICHOLSON</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>ON-LINE RESOURCES FOR FANTASY LOVERS</b>	<b>16</b>

## BOOK ONE: THE WIND SINGER

In the walled city of Aramanth, the citizens' lives are ruled by frequent exams and family rankings that determine their jobs, their social status, the quality of their dwellings, and even the color of their clothes. Everyone vows to strive harder and reach higher, every day, and the people are full of anger and envy—except the family of twins Bowman and Kestrel, who believe in ideas and dreams, and that everyone should be rewarded not for test scores, but for what they are good at. Hanno Hath, the kindly librarian father, and his wife, the prophetess Ira, cherish the twins and their little sister, Pinto; and they all resist the domination by test scores, at first privately, and then in open rebellion.

Running away from a bad day at school, Kestrel climbs the wind singer, a mysterious wooden structure at the center of the town. At the top she finds an empty slot where the missing voice mechanism fits—the voice that, according to legend, protected Aramanth from the fierce Zar soldiers long ago. Shouting out her frustration in all the bad words she knows, Kestrel is arrested by Maslo Inch, the Chief Examiner, and sentenced to undergo the sinister Special Teaching. She escapes by climbing a tower, and at the top finds the Emperor, an ineffective old man who gives her a map and explains that she must go on a quest to bring back the device that activates the wind singer's voice, the only thing that will liberate their society.

Kestrel and her twin, Bowman, set out, followed doggedly by the class reject, lonely and stinky Mumpo. After encounters with the humble and kindly Mud People and the warlike Ombaraka, a town on wheels that sails across the desert, and pursued by the terrifying old children from Special Teaching, they eventually find the voice of the wind singer in the halls of the Morah. But in taking it, they rouse the merciless Zars, who begin to march in never-ending ranks toward Aramanth as the three children race to return the voice to the wind singer in time.



## FOR DISCUSSION

**The theme of *The Wind Singer* is the injustice and lack of freedom in a society governed by official ranking. Here are some questions to help you clarify your own thoughts about this important idea.**

1. The subjects of the examinations in Aramant are calculation, grammar, general science, and general art. Hanno Hath says, “Whatever brilliance I have remains undetected in exams.” What kinds of brilliance and ability are not measured by these four subjects? Who decides what the subjects of tests should be?
2. Principal Pillish tells the examinees that the High Examination “does not favour only those with natural aptitude. It favours those who work hard.” Is this true, both in the book and in your own experience? He also instructs them to “Read. Remember. Repeat.” Is this real learning? What would be a better way to teach?
3. “Each of us should be tested on what we do best,” Hanno tells his fellow examinees.

What would be the results of this method? Are there some things people need to learn even if they don’t do them well? What would you like to be tested on? How do you know what you are good at until you are tested on it?

4. The people of Aramant are told that they are free because they own the power to better themselves. But do they really? Why or why not? They are also told that there is no poverty in their society, but the people of grey district are kept poor deliberately. Why?
5. Before Aramant was subject to the ratings system, they depended on debates and elections to guide their city. Which do you think is better? What are the problems of each method? Give examples from your own experience.
6. Kestrel says, “I’m already at the bottom of the class. What more can you do to me?” The High Examiner takes her up on this challenge. What does our own world do to someone who chooses to be at the bottom of the class? In desperation, Kestrel runs away from the constant testing. Does this solve

her problems? What is the real solution to an unfair situation in society?

7. The Emperor tells Kestrel that testing has led to envy and fear. Is this always true? How else is rank or competency established, other than by testing? Would competition exist without ranking? What would be the shape of a group (or an art or a sport) without competition?
8. Research the history of Civil Service examinations, or testing for competency and promotion within government. Talk to an adult who has taken such a test in this country. Does he or she feel the exam was fair in the way it tested ability to do the job?
9. On pages 347 and 348, Maslo Inch contemplates the justice of the exam system. Stage this as a skit, with Hanno and Ira Hath, Kestrel, Bowman, Scooch, and you yourself each taking a turn to present your arguments against the system.

And here are some questions about other people and ideas in *The Wind Singer*:

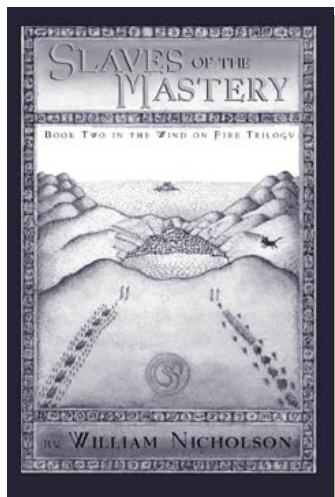
1. Kestrel relieves her feelings by making a song of all the bad words she knows (page 38). These are, of course, made-up swear words. Try saying them aloud and then making up some of your own. What qualities give a swear word shock value? Why do they need to be rude to be satisfying?
2. Ira Hath is a reluctant prophetess to her people. What is a prophet or a prophetess? Research the stories of some other prophets and prophetesses (Cassandra, Elijah, Muhammad) to see why Ira is unwilling to take on this role. What is the mark of a true prophetess (page 241)?
3. Mumpo lives in the present and is simple in his feelings and reactions. Is he stupid or wise? What qualities in his character are revealed to Bowman only gradually as he gets to know the other boy (p. 249)? How are these qualities shown in his actions?
4. Chewing tixa leaves helps the three through some bad times, but gives them only false energy and courage. The men of the Mud People find relief from their hard work in tixa, but have hangovers the next day. Does tixa's harm outweigh its benefits?
5. The Ombaraka are essentially a gentle people, but eager for war. Are you satisfied with Kemba's explanation of this contradiction (page 195)? Do you think their solution—to fight through war machines without killing each other—is a good one? Are there flaws?

6. On page 169 there is a detailed description of a land-sailer. If you are artistic, try turning these words into a diagram or model of this type of craft.
7. What becomes of the old children who are hit by the fireballs or the other old people who go into the fire? (Hint: Mumpo is the evidence.)
8. For a role-playing game about these four societies (Manth, Mud People, Ombaraka, and Zars) see the Teachers' Section of this Readers' Companion.

## BOOK TWO: SLAVES OF THE MASTERY

Freed from their subjugation to testing, the people of Aramant have enjoyed five happy years. A reformed Maslo Inch has acknowledged Mumpo as his son, and Mumpo and the twins have become—through their shared adventure—mature teenagers with a growing sense of their individual destinies. But suddenly the armies of the Mastery, led by the handsome and ambitious Ortiz, sack and burn the city and drive the Manth people on a long march toward the High Domain of the Mastery. Ortiz enforces obedience by the dreadful device of the monkey cages, in which random Manth victims are burned alive for any transgression among the people. Maslo Inch becomes the first example.

Kestrel is separated from the others in the attack. Following Bowman's trail, she is overtaken by the royal carriage caravan of the king and queen of Gang, who are escorting their exquisitely beautiful but naïve and pampered daughter, Sisi, the Johdila of Gang, to her political marriage with the son of the Master. Sisi is fascinated by Kestrel's forthrightness and makes her the official Friend. The caravan is accompanied by the Johjan Guards, thousands of perfectly trained soldiers led by the young commander Zohon. Kestrel plots to use his attraction to Sisi as a way to trigger a battle that will allow her people to escape.



Meanwhile, the Manth slaves have arrived at the High Domain, the

gleaming multicolored lake city of the Mastery, where Ortiz presents them as spoils to the Master. The slaves are fed and housed well and given jobs that suit their talents, and the threat of the monkey cages deafens them to Ira's prophecy that they must take back their freedom and journey to their homeland. Bowman is singled out by Ortiz and taken along on a visit to the huge white-haired Master, where he sees the complexity of this powerful man who has built a beautiful city with happy slaves. Ortiz is appointed the Master's son, but despite his coming marriage to Sisi, he desires Kestrel, while the princess has fallen in love with Bowman, although Zohon still yearns for her. At the marriage festivities, Sisi's last-minute refusal to marry Ortiz triggers a battle that destroys the city and the Johjan Guards, and Zohon, realizing he has been deceived, slashes Sisi's face to ruin her beauty. Bowman opens himself to the power of the Morah to defeat the Master in a mind-duel, setting a little band of the Manth free to travel toward the homeland.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. The structure of *Slaves of the Mastery* is classic in its simplicity. It begins with the destruction of Aramant and ends with the destruction of the High Domain, and in between there are the two long marches approaching their mutual goal. You might want to express this in a diagram. What is the source of the tension that pulls our attention back and forth between the two caravans? How are the two leaders, Zohon and Ortiz, similar, and how do they differ?
2. When we first meet the Johdila, she is almost idiotic in her naïve vanity. What are the influences that contribute to her growth as a strong young woman? At the end, when her beauty has been destroyed by Zohon, she says, "I can be me, now." What does she mean?
3. The manaxa, with its "terrible elegance," would make a great video game. The title, of course, would be Manaxa, but what would you choose as a subtitle for each video? What other historical ritual fighting games does it remind you of?
4. Discuss the following "wise" sayings from the characters in *Slaves of the Mastery*. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

"Better to be a slave and live, than to be free and die."—Dr. Greeth

“Freedom is vanity. Freedom is greed. It sets man against man. It makes savages of us all.”—Ortiz

“We live in the real world. Our duty is to make the best of it.”—Dr. Greeth

“It’s a natural human instinct, to love those in power.”—The Master

“Where’s the sense in punishing people who have done something wrong? That’s too late, . . . No, punish people before they’ve done anything wrong, and then they won’t do it, will they?”—Chief clerk

“A single act of terror forces obedience. Without obedience, there’s chaos. With obedience come peace and order.”—Ortiz

“Friendship is nothing more than habit and convenience.”—Mist

5. The armies of the Mastery keep their captives absolutely under control with the diabolical—and clever—device of the monkey cage. Why is this so effective? On what does it depend?
6. Mist the cat is a charming and amusing character. Do his lines remind you of the attitude of cats you have known? Choose a scene in which Mist is a central character and retell it from the cat’s point of view.
7. Kestrel tells Bowman: “You’re the one who feels, and I’m the one who does.” What evidence in their actions shows that this is an accurate description?

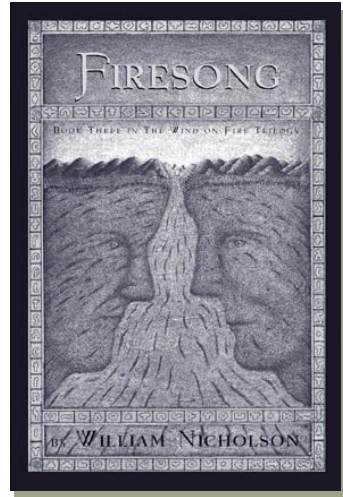
## BOOK THREE: FIRESONG

Spurred on by Ira’s urgent warnings that “the wind is rising,” the Manth marchers struggle to journey through the hard winter. A passion fly plagues them, its sting escalating hidden passions out of control, driving Sisi to kiss Bowman and Pinto to declare her love for Mumpo and her anger at her sister as a rival. As the little band crosses the deep crevasses of a desert, they are waylaid by bandits, who capture six of the young women, including Kestrel and Sisi. They are taken to the hidden stronghold of the bandit people, where they are told they are to be chosen as brides by the young warriors. Kestrel leads Bowman to the village by mind-contact, where her quick thinking and Mumpo’s fierce fighting, helped by Bowman’s sardonic cat, Mist, rescues the girls at the last minute.

Almost frozen to death by a terrible snowstorm, they emerge into a warm steamy jungle land presided over by the fat jolly Captain Canobius, who welcomes them to this paradise of warmth and easy food. Some of the Manth party begin to feel that they should end their journey here, until Bowman discovers that a feast prepared for them by the Captain is full of poison.

Beyond the valley they find fleeing villagers and much talk of fires in the sky and the end of days. Bowman has long felt that he is the chosen one to save his people and that he will be taken away to do this; and now a messenger comes for him. Kestrel insists that she must go, too, and so the two make their heart-wrenching farewells to their family and friends. The messenger takes them to a barge on a river, where Bowman is trained by the former Master to use his mystical telepathic and telekinetic powers and to fly.

As the Manth near the homeland, Ira grows ever weaker, and Pinto discovers that she has inherited the mantle of prophecy. Kestrel, too, finds her role: she is the one who is to die in the coming firesong, while Bowman is to return to guide his people. The Singer People, who have watched over them since the prologue of the trilogy, gather and begin to burn with their final song, as the Manth overcome the last obstacle to reaching their homeland with the help of the wind on fire.



## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Near the end of the book, Bowman describes Mumpo as “simple and clear and straight, all the way to the bottom, like a mountain pool.” What other fine qualities do we now see in Mumpo? Compare the lonely, runny-nosed Mumpo we first met in *The Wind Singer* with the man he has become. In what ways have Bowman and Kestrel changed too? Ira? Pinto? What has caused these changes?
2. When Canobius tells the Manth that there on his “island” there is no

work, only ease and plenty, little Scooch puzzles, “It seems wrong. Not to have to work.” Does it seem that way to you or not? Ira, too, is uneasy, and describes the place as “squashy.” What does she mean?

3. On page 134, Kestrel remembers the poem Ruffy Blesh wrote long ago and contrasts it with the bitter young man he had become. Write a poem for Mumpo or Pinto or Bowman or Kestrel or Sisi that sums up their feelings at this point in the story.
4. Fire plays an important part in each novel, but in different ways, both good and bad. What is its function in each book?
5. William Nicholson is a screenwriter, and so he often writes cinematically. What scenes in this trilogy would work particularly well in a movie? What actors would you cast in the main roles?
6. Who or what is the Morah? What clues have we been given throughout the trilogy? On page 275 Kestrel describes the mor, the quality that pervades the Morah. How is “lose all, give all” the opposite path? How does this compare to traditional ideas about the nature of God and the Devil.

## A TALK WITH WILLIAM NICHOLSON

*Well before he wrote the Wind on Fire trilogy, William Nicholson enjoyed a brilliant career in film. Nicholson began his writing career producing documentaries for the BBC. He went on to become screenwriter of such movies as Shadowlands, Nell, First Knight, and Gladiators—for which he garnered an Academy Award nomination. Nicholson then became a director himself, with his 1998 film Firelight. With so much success in the movie industry, what made him decide to turn his attention to writing children's literature?*

"I was at the point where my only other work was screenplays, and I was very grateful for that, but for a writer there is a downside to it. Your work is always at the mercy of several people, which can be frustrating. So I began looking for a corner I could call my own—a place where I could go out to play. And that became The Wind on Fire trilogy," he explained.

It was only natural for him to write about fantasy, as he wrote his first novel when he was just sixteen years old. The story was heavily influenced by James Bond stories. Although the novel was never published, Nicholson realized that he had a flair for fantasy.

The Wind on Fire trilogy was initially supposed to be one book, *The Wind Singer*. "I really wanted to see what people would think of it first." He didn't have to worry—as it turned out, two of Britain's top children's book editors immediately began vying for the rights.

According to Nicholson, the key to creating an exciting fantasy begins with the characters. And talking to Nicholson for even just a few minutes, you can see how close he is to characters like Bowman, Kestrel, Mumpo, and Pinto. More than once, he refers to them as "my children." He talks a lot about their character development. "Character development—how the characters grow throughout the story—is the key to creating a gripping fantasy." He says.

Another key element that makes this series so engaging is that all three books are filled with powerful themes, which Nicholson, with his classical Roman Catholic education, calls "theology." Thought-provoking themes, such as family unity, the concept of slavery vs. freedom, the validity of our existing testing system, and conformism vs. individuality resonate throughout.

Engaging with issues such as these has garnered the trilogy an adult following. But what Nicholson finds most gratifying is the response of young

fans. The books have been a tremendous hit in the United Kingdom, and Nicholson is deluged with fan mail. Kids send him games, draw pictures, make up recipes for “mudnuts,” tell him, “this is the best book I’ve ever read in my life.” “They pick up on different things, too,” he observed. The eight-year-olds, like his daughter, enjoy the talking cats and flying hermits, while the fourteen-year-olds are deep into the philosophical aspects.

When we asked the consummate screenwriting professional if he had made a Hollywood deal for the trilogy, the answer surprised us. Speaking passionately, Nicholson replied, “I have had a lot of offers to make the trilogy into a movie, and I have refused every one of them. I have said that I don’t want it to be a movie until everyone has read my books in paperback. Books are not merely ‘movies in waiting’. A book is a meeting place between the writer’s world and that of the reader. An important part of this process for any reader is bringing your own experiences to the book. In a movie, everything is set out for you and you’re unable to see it in any other way.”

It took Nicholson five years to complete the highly acclaimed trilogy, as he balanced his publishing and movie careers. After having spent so much time on the project, we asked Nicholson if, now that the trilogy is over, it’s been hard letting go of his “children.” “Yes, of course, because they are all little bits of me, every one of them,” he said. “But the end of the trilogy is also an exhilarating time, because of the enormous creative satisfaction I’ve gotten from writing it. As I was finishing *Firesong* [the final volume], I had the sensation of simply discovering the story, as if it was already written and waiting for me. That’s a truly wonderful feeling for any writer to have.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



William Nicholson had a brilliant career well before he wrote **The Wind on Fire Trilogy**. He was first a writer and producer of more than forty documentaries for the BBC, then the Academy Award–nominated screenwriter of such movies as *Shadowlands*, *Sarafina!*, *Nell*, *First Knight*, and *Gladiators*, and finally a movie director himself, with 1998's *Firelight*. Nicholson lives in a 14th-century farmhouse in East Sussex, England, with his wife, Virginia, and three children, a boy and two girls ranging in age from 8 to 13.

## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR FANTASY LOVERS

**Fantastic Fiction**—[www.fantasticfiction.co.uk](http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk)

Comprehensive bibliographies of science fiction, fantasy, and horror authors.

**Fluent in Fantasy**—[www.genrefluent.com](http://www.genrefluent.com)

Many reviews and links by young-adult librarian and genre expert Diane Herald.

**Locus**—[www.locusmag.com](http://www.locusmag.com)

The award-winning journal of science fiction and fantasy, with interviews, reviews, and recommended reading lists.

**Mythopoeic Society**—[www.mythsoc.org](http://www.mythsoc.org)

A prestigious society devoted to the study of mythic fantasy, especially the works of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Links to mythic chat groups and the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship.

**The SF Site: The Home Page for Science Fiction and Fantasy**—[www.sfsite.com/home.htm](http://www.sfsite.com/home.htm)

Information on authors, awards, and forthcoming books, plus links to bibliographies and audiobooks.

**Uchronia: The Alternate History List—[www.uchronia.net](http://www.uchronia.net)**

An annotated bibliography of novels, essays, and short stories about alternate histories or “what ifs.”

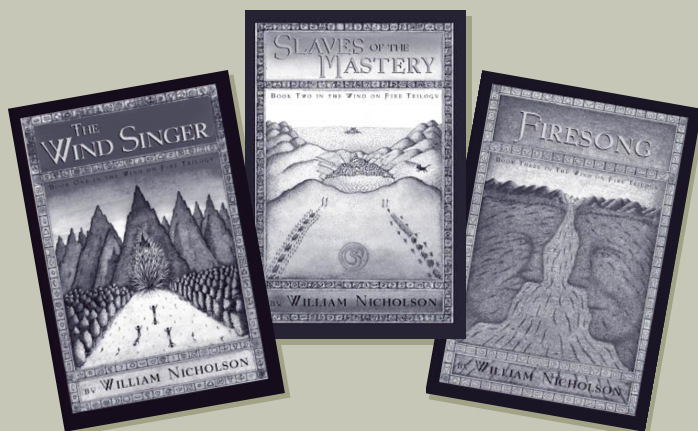
**World Fantasy Convention—[www.worldfantasy.org](http://www.worldfantasy.org)**

Information about past and future World Fantasy Conventions and their awards

*This readers' companion was prepared by young-adult literature specialist Patty Campbell, winner of the Grolier Award from the American Library Association and the ALAN Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.*

# THE WIND ON FIRE TRILOGY

by William Nicholson



## **The Wind Singer**

Hardcover: 0-7868-0569-2, \$17.99/NCR

Paperback: 0-7868-1799-2, \$11.99/NCR

## **Slaves of the Mastery**

Hardcover: 0-7868-0570-6, \$17.99/NCR

Paperback: 0-7868-1800-X, \$11.99/NCR

## **Firesong**

Hardcover: 0-7868-0571-4, \$17.99/NCR

Paperback: 0-7868-1801-8, \$11.99/NCR

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