
Kriti's Book Log Documentation

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This is a record of my reading starting in 2011. Things start to get more systematic in 2012.

Contents:

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This will contain a description of the structure of this book log.

CHAPTER 2

2011 Reading

This list may be incomplete, as I wasn't keeping meticulous records.

Reviewed books

Some of these reviews are pretty informal (mostly the earlier ones), since they were just forum posts.

The Hero and the Crown by Robin McKinley

I expected to love this book, but I'm not sure if I do. It was a lot more "real" but also a lot more "epic" than young adult books I usually read. A lot of time (i.e. months and years) was spent learning and convalescing - in many fantasy books, the "Chosen One" has two days of training and manages to defeat monsters that no one has ever come close to hurting. The character also seemed to grow with age - incidents in her childhood are described with detail, even if insignificant, but comparatively few pages are spent on the more heroic parts. It was an interesting writing style, I need to process more to figure out how I feel about it. I definitely liked the protagonist and most of the characters. This might be a spoiler, but I thought the second love interest was unnecessary, but understandable. After building up Tor to be such a sympathetic character, I wasn't prepared to like anyone else. However, it did add some realism to the book.

Sorry if that was too much of a ramble!

Posted on LibraryThing on January 19, 2011

A Countess Below Stairs by Eva Ibbotson

I really enjoyed A Countess Below Stairs, despite not really liking the romance genre (and the romance was my least favourite part.) However, I did enjoy a slightly more adult version of Ibbotson's style of storytelling. Her books are always a pleasure to read; you can be assured of a happy ending and everything falls into place incredibly neatly. There's a stability in the predictability of the books which I enjoy.

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 22, 2011

Odd and the Frost Giants by Neil Gaiman

I would hardly consider Odd and the Frost Giants a book; it was so short! I loved it, though - Gaiman is one of my favourite authors. I love mythological stories, and it was interesting to see Gaiman tackle Norse mythology so differently from his American Gods universe. The epic battles faced by the protagonists are not my favourite things about Gaiman's work, so it was great to have Odd outwitting the Frost Giant, instead of fighting him.

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 22, 2011

A Company of Swans by Eva Ibbotson

I didn't like A Company of Swans as much as Ibbotson's other books. The romance was much more central to the story, and I'm not a romance reader. I also found the protagonist, Harriet, a little too meek and helpless for my tastes.

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 22, 2011

The Star of Kazan by Eva Ibbotson

It was pretty standard fare (and great, of course.) There were far fewer coincidental relationships in the book - usually every major character turns out to be someone's long-lost something or the other, but that didn't happen! I think I'm going to take a break from Ibbotson for a bit, though - I'm not enjoying her books as much as I usually do. I own four more that I have not read - The Dragonfly Pool, The Haunting of Granite Falls, The Beast of Clawstone Castle and The Morning Gift.

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 28, 2011

Serve the People by Jen Lin-Liu

I started reading Serve the People by Jen Lin-Liu, which is pretty great. I'm glad I'm reading non-fiction, and I especially love non-fiction that is about food. The book is divided into parts, and I'm done with Part One, which is about her experiences going to cooking school in China. It's very interesting to learn about Chinese food, culture, the revolution and the stories of ordinary people. I did not know much about the Communist revolution at all, and it's making me want to find books about it.

I'm glad it was divided into parts because I can never put down a book until I am done with it, and this gave me a natural stopping point. I believe Part Two is about her apprenticing to an actual restaurant, and the people she meets. I'm looking forward to it.

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 28, 2011, 2:17 am

Finished *Serve the People* by Jen Lin-Liu which was very interesting. I'm usually finicky about what meat I eat, so some of the recipes/foods made me shiver a little bit (i.e. the restaurant that only served animal genitalia, eating dogs, snakes, civets, cats...), but aside from that, the book was great! I talked about Part One earlier, in #17 (for some reason, touchstones didn't work), the rest was about Lin-Liu's apprenticeships in a noodle shack, a dumpling place and then a gourmet fusion restaurant. She tells the story of the people she meets very well. There's the determined migrant who owns the noodle shop but has to keep opening new restaurants every few months since he's only breaking even. He's been living apart from his wife for eight years and is cheated regularly by his niece who works for him. There's Jerome Leung, the Chinese celebrity-ish chef she works under, and his life story. There are many, many slices of Chinese life.

An interesting quote/tidbit: When I started writing about food, two years before I enrolled in cooking school, I started by interviewing old Chinese chefs, most of whom began their careers not long after the Communist Revolution. I'd ask them how they got interested in cooking. I quickly learned that it was a stupid question. The answer was always the same: "I wasn't interested. I didn't have a choice." Under China's state-planned economy, the government drafted people for their jobs, ..."

This makes total sense, of course, but it was still funny to read about it in a book devoted to food :). Even today, cooking isn't an art in China, it's just a low paying job. I'm from India, and my family ran a restaurant for a while, so it was very familiar to me - people are not drafted into their jobs, but there is no glamour associated with cooking, and people who specialise in one form of cooking generally cannot cook anything else.

It was also interesting to read about how the Chinese perceive Chinese-Americans like Ms. Lin-Liu, and how they were unable to comprehend the concept of a Chinese-American!

The recipes scattered throughout the book were a great idea (although I'm biased; I always think recipes are a great idea.) I probably will not try a lot of them out, but the noodles and the dumplings look interesting. There's also a eggplant sauce that looked pretty cool.

Anyway, definitely a good read!

Posted on LibraryThing on Jan 28, 2011, 8:46 pm

Swordspoint by Ellen Kushner

First book in February.

This was marketed as fantasy (I think), so I expected it to have magic, but it didn't. It was also marketed as a melodrama of manners, which it lived up to pretty admirably. I'm a fan of swashbuckling, and the world of Riverside was pretty compelling. There was a lot of killing, which I was a bit surprised by - usually death is taken a little more seriously than in this book, but it fit with its tone.

I guess I would describe the tone as somewhat detached and flippant, which made me both like it and not feel too attached to it. While I was glad that it avoided the epic fantasy style of taking itself really seriously, the characters were not particularly likable (or unlikable.) That's not really a bad thing.

I will be reading further in the series (but am determined to make inroads into the 220 books I own but still need to read. Any recommendations as to what to read next are welcome.

Posted on LibraryThing on Feb 4, 2011

Hallowe'en Party by Agatha Christie

For the first time, I guessed the murderer right! Not much to say beyond that.

Posted on LibraryThing on Feb 4, 2011

The Morning Gift by Eva Ibbotson

didn't really like it.

Posted on LibraryThing on Mar 27, 2011

The Relic Master by Catherine Fisher

This book was a fun read, but probably not memorable enough to revisit. That's totally fine, though.

Anara is a world that's policed by a tyrannical Watch, and the Order of Keepers has been outlawed. We follow the Keeper Galen and his apprentice Raffi on their adventures. Carys, an undercover member of the Watch joins them on their journey.

Things I enjoyed: - The combination of technology and fantasy - the descriptions of the Relics sound very similar to modern technology, but they seem to be artifacts of magical power. I loved the underpinnings of science fiction in this

world of mostly mythological fantasy. - Carys' character was done well, her thoughts and how her perceptions change made her seem real. There were no sudden turnarounds in character - everything was nice and gradual. - I thought the Sekoi were an interesting addition, I can't wait to find out how they fit into this world. - Galen and Raffi were good protagonists. Even though they weren't given too much detail or complexity, I was able to get a good sense of what they were like. - I liked the alternating third/first person narration.

I'm definitely going to keep up with this series.

Mar 27, 2011

The Case of the Missing Servant by Tarquin Hall

received from alcottacre, much thanks. I really enjoyed it!

Posted on LibraryThing on Mar 27, 2011

White Sands, Red Menace by Ellen Klages

I read White Sands, Red Menace by Ellen Klages - it's a sequel to The Green Glass Sea, which is one of my favourite books. It's about a girl whose father works for the Manhattan Project and her life in Los Alamos. Everyone's parents are working on the atom bomb, and that's a very interesting place to set a book from a 12 year old girl's point of view. It isn't very dramatic or climactic, things just sort of happen. (Dramatic things do happen sometimes, but it isn't written dramatically.)

White Sands, Red Menace is set after the bomb goes off, and explores its aftermath, the passing of the Atomic Energy act, scientist households being strained by pacifism vs. more research etc. It's all written pretty unbiasedly and has the same slow-paced but satisfying feeling.

Posted on LibraryThing on Mar 28, 2011

Embassytown by China Miéville

This book was excellent. When I first started reading it, I appreciated it mostly for the ideas and the writing (Language is really cool!) I was afraid that the characters would be flat and there would not be much of an emotional core to the book. I was happy to be proven wrong - the book delivers on every count.

Nov 29, 2011

Dragon Wing by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

I thought this book was okay - I found no fault with the writing or worldbuilding or the characters, really. I didn't find it very compelling, though - perhaps because of the lack of the unwitting/unwilling hero stereotype that I've come to associate with fantasy. I couldn't make myself care about the characters as much as I'd like to.

I'll keep reading the series, but I'm in no hurry. 3/5.

Posted on LibraryThing on Nov 29, 2011

The Summer Tree by Guy Gavriel Kay

I'd heard a lot about Guy Gavriel Kay, so I decided to start reading The Fionavar Tapestry series. I liked it better than Dragon Wing, but I still wasn't that impressed. Some things didn't make sense to me - if Fionavar is the first of all worlds, why is it still so "primitive", especially if the people there know of modern day Earth (and can pretend to fit in here.)

Dec 1, 2011, 2:05pm

Bone in the Throat by Anthony Bourdain

I think I was burned out on fantasy temporarily, so instead of following through with my plans to read *The Way of Kings* or *Lord Foul's Bane*, I decided to read a book that I got almost a year ago.

Bone in the Throat is a book about “murder, mayhem and the mob”, featuring a restaurant setting and a protagonist who's a sous-chef. I'm a fan of Anthony Bourdain's show “No Reservations”, and I've also read “Kitchen Confidential”, his non-fiction memoir. I was still surprised by how good *Bone in the Throat* was - apparently Bourdain's a great fiction writer in addition to being a great chef and traveller. It was well-written and funny, and short enough not to get boring. My only complaint is that there's a lot of gore - which also happens to be really well described. It's to be expected in a book about the mob, but I'm a bit squeamish.

Dec 3, 2011, 2:57am

From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E.L. Konigsburg

I wanted a light Friday night read, so I read *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg. It was excellent, of course. Is it just me or are the children's books of the past much better than these days?

Dec 10, 2011, 2:49am

Lord Foul's Bane by Stephen R. Donaldson

Just finished *Lord Foul's Bane* by Stephen R. Donaldson. I think I liked it, but not enough to want to immediately want to read the next books.

I don't know why, but I don't enjoy the concept of people from present-day Earth getting transported to fantasy worlds. (The only exception to this I can think of is *The Neverending Story*.) I do enjoy urban fantasy/Harry Potter, etc. - just not modern people in medieval-type worlds. That's probably also why I didn't enjoy *The Summer Tree* as much as I thought I would.

Thomas Covenant was also an annoying protagonist. His character and behavior made sense based on what he went through, but I was still a bit disgusted that he raped a teenage girl and didn't really have to answer for it, plus he's lauded as a hero. I didn't really want to root for him.

Dec 11, 2011, 4:35am

A Sickness in the Family by Denise Mina and Antonio Fuso

I've had the flu for the last few days, and consequently have been asleep for a large portion of them. I'm still really excited about reading the 25 books mentioned in my last post, so today I pulled them all out and made a couple of big piles in my room. (I also found some additional books that I haven't read, but more on them in the future.)

I've been going a bit stir crazy, so despite being really woozy, I decided to make a start on the pile, and read the shortest book – *A Sickness in the Family* by Denise Mina (illustrated by Antonio Fuso.) (In fact, I'm still pretty woozy, so this entry might be even more disjointed than usual.)

cover for “a sickness in the family” I discovered this book on Blogging for a Good Book (run by the Williamsburg Regional Library) and bought it when I was on a “I really need to branch out and not read so much young adult/fantasy”/“I should read mystery authors other than Agatha Christie”/“I should read more graphic novels” kick. The book is about a normal family (or so you think) whose members are being killed off one-by-one. The house might be haunted, but it seems far more likely that a member of the family is the killer.

Even though this was a pretty quick read, the players in the murder mystery (i.e. the Usher family) are set up really well and the setting (their perhaps-haunted house) is definitely atmospheric. The Ushers are all thoroughly unlikeable, and I don't think anyone is really unhappy when they start dying off. The book is pretty fast-paced, and the twists and turns, although not entirely unpredictable, are pretty fun (especially the end.)

The WRL review of the book describes it as a “delightfully nasty little graphic novel”, and I absolutely concur. My only complaint is that it was so short.

Dec 16, 2011, 9.48pm

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making by Catherynne M. Valente

I wish that I hadn't jumped the gun in writing my “Best reads of 2011” post, since it's still 2011 and The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making would have definitely been on it.

This book reminded me of The Phantom Tollbooth. That is pretty much the highest praise I can give to a book. Other things that it had touches of: Roald Dahl's quirky humour, Neil Gaiman's whimsy and a world that reminded me a bit of The Neverending Story.

September, a girl from Omaha, Nebraska is given an opportunity to travel to Fairyland by the Green Wind, and of course she takes it. The book tells of her adventures there and her quest to defeat the evil Marquess. (I suppose there's a touch of Oz in there, too.)

Catherynne M. Valente is known for her beautiful and evocative prose, and she definitely does not disappoint here. I sometimes find omniscient narrators a little annoying, but Valente makes it charming and delightful.

I loved that the story depends so much on September's conscious choices, rather than her reacting to things that she happens to come across. I thought that was very well conveyed, and made September an captivating protagonist.

Summary: irresistible. Go read it now!

Dec 17, 2011, 6.02 am

Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors by Lizzie Collingham

A lot of the non-fiction that I've been reading lately has been about food and Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors by Lizzie Collingham is the latest in that trend. It describes the history of Indian food and how it was influenced by various invaders and immigrants. Collingham makes the argument that “authentic” Indian food has never really existed and shows the evolution of various Indian cuisines, both in cooking styles and use of ingredients.

I thought that this book would have a lot of speculation and conjecture, but it is actually meticulously researched – almost every paragraph contains a citation or two. Consequently, the book is a little bit prosaic, although it flows quite well and the wealth of information that it contains certainly makes the dryness excusable. The book starts off with a description of Indian cooking as described in early Ayurvedic texts, and then talks about how the Mughals, Portuguese and British, in particular, changed these methods.

It's amazing to think about how many common Indian foods (potatoes, tomatoes, cauliflower, corn, custard apples, pineapples, chillies) are from the New World or Europe and were introduced to India in the seventeenth century or even later. I was especially surprised that chillies weren't always part of Indian cuisine (although apparently chillies were adopted by Indians so quickly, that by the time they spread to some parts of Europe – Germany, Hungary etc. – they were believed to be indigenous to India.)

Another thing I found astonishing that the British had to set up a marketing campaign to get Indians to drink tea, given that India is currently the world's largest producer and consumer of tea. They set up an Indian Tea Association, that among other things, went door-to-door demonstrating the proper preparation of tea, and during the Second World War, had “tea-vans” that provided Indian soldiers with tea and letter writers to keep in touch with their families while at war.

The book also details the culinary lives of the British living in India (“Anglo-Indians”) and to a lesser extent, other cultures. I found the change in British fashions absolutely fascinating – from authentically prepared curry, to the excesses of burra khana, to tinned salmon. The influence of Indian food all over the world (the West Indies, Pacific Islands, Japan) was also something I didn’t know much about, and I am glad it was included.

A couple of minor nitpicks – the notion of not eating food prepared by (or even come into contact with) an “impure” person (i.e. of a lower caste/different religion) seems incredibly archaic to me, but seems to have been pretty prevalent, according to Collingham. As an Indian, I would’ve liked it if she had been clearer that it is a relic of the past. Perhaps I’m just being too touchy, considering that this is a book dealing with history.

I also found the mention of the British divide-and-rule policy annoying, since it was only talked about in one paragraph, and I would have liked to hear more about the “apparently benign acts of cultural accommodation” by the British with regards to segregating food service by religion.

Dec 18, 2011, 3.34 am

The Way of Kings by Brandon Sanderson

The Way of Kings is the first book in a projected ten-part epic fantasy series (The Stormlight Archive) by Brandon Sanderson. After reading other Sanderson books (the Mistborn series, Wheel of Time), I was almost certain that I would fall in love with this book, and so I didn’t really want to start it, because I liked being able to look forward to reading it. Unfortunately, that plan didn’t work, and now I have to wait a year or more for the next book to be released.

Way of Kings coverSo yeah, I thought The Way of Kings was a fantastic book. I’m always at a loss to describe what I like about good books because I get so immersed in the world and characters that it’s hard to pick out things as being outstanding. The world was richly drawn, with detailed mythologies, history, countries, peoples, etc. The main characters were all fascinating, three-dimensional people with compelling stories. I liked the description of the Vorin society – it’s interesting that women have their own specialties and talents, as opposed to a lot of traditional fantasy. After reading Mistborn, with its clear descriptions of the (really cool) magic systems, I expected something similar, but magic is very much shrouded in mystery, and that’s pretty well portrayed. I love the amount of scholarship depicted in this book.

I found that the middle dragged a tiny bit as Kaladin sorted out his emotions and accepted being a leader, but I think that’s a curse of first books in series’ – the hero has to go on a believable journey. It also seemed like a whole bunch of plot twists came at the very end; I would have appreciated it if there were a couple of those to liven up the middle of the book. However, it did succeed in making me really impatient for the next installment of the story.

One really cool thing about Brandon Sanderson’s books that I recently found out (on his official fansite, The 17th Shard) is that they are all set on different planets in the same cosmere universe. They even share a couple of characters, and I believe they do have a large overlapping mystery. I can’t wait to read Elantris and Warbreaker and try to catch the references there. (I still have 21 books to go before I can acquire those, though.)

Anyway, I’d say I want the next book right now, but Brandon Sanderson is also finishing up The Wheel of Time, and I also want to read A Memory of Light really badly. Maybe I could have both concurrently?

Dec 20, 2011, 8:00 pm

The Thief Lord by Cornelia Funke

I seem to be sick again, so this review might not be as coherent as others.

The Thief Lord follows Prosper and Bo, two brothers who have run away from home to Venice after their mother died. Their mothers’ sister wants to adopt Bo (because he is five years old and looks adorable), but can’t be bothered with Prosper, and the brothers do not want to be separated. They are taken in by a mysterious “Thief Lord” who looks after them, along with a few other homeless kids.

I really enjoyed the setting – Venice is described in such lovely and magical terms that it seems like a character rather than just a city where the story takes place. I expected this book to have more fantasy than it actually did – it's mostly just a book about the adventures of a group of kids.

Most of the characters were fun to read about, but I had a hard time liking Scipio, the Thief Lord. I didn't really know what to think about the way his story progressed. [Spoilers follow]. Most stories I've read about kids who don't like their family end up with them realising that their family loves them and that they actually have a pretty good life. Scipio's story ends with him turning into an adult and never seeing his family again! I didn't think his life was that bad – he just had a stern father. Also, how does it work when a boy that hasn't gone through puberty yet suddenly turns into an adult man? That ending was what John Scalzi calls the flying snowman, for me. [Spoilers end]. However, I did like that there wasn't a "message" to the story – things just happened, and it didn't end completely happily.

Overall, the book was an entertaining read, and I think I should have liked it more than I actually did. I'll still read more of Funke's work, but I'm not in a hurry.

Dec 25, 2011, 10.50 pm

The Privilege of the Sword by Ellen Kushner

The Privilege of the Sword follows Katherine, a poor noblewoman who is invited to her uncle's home in the city. She arrives expecting a season of balls and parties and hoping to find a good match and secure her family's future, but her uncle, the unconventional Mad Duke Tremontaine, has other ideas. Katherine is to become a swordsman (and his bodyguard), unprecedented for a woman.

I first heard about this book on the Williamsburg Regional Library blog, Blogging for a Good Book. Like that reviewer, I was immediately struck by the proud swordswoman on the cover, and being a sucker for swashbuckling women, figured that I would probably enjoy the book. Upon further research, I discovered that it was a sequel to Swordpoint, which I decided to read first (earlier this year.) Although I didn't love Swordpoint, I liked it enough to want to read more, and I've finally gotten around to it.

The Privilege of the Sword, and other Ellen Kushner books have been described as a "fantasy of manners." I can certainly understand the "manners" bit, but I'm not quite sure that it's a fantasy. I've always thought of the defining characteristic of fantasy being magic/some sort of supernatural power. The Privilege of the Sword takes place in an imaginary world, but there is no magic involved.

Anyway, onto the actual review. I really enjoyed the book, more so than Swordpoint, probably because of the younger, female protagonist. Katherine was a lot of fun to read about, she's determined, curious, and honourable. She manages to become an accomplished swordsman without losing any of her femininity. Her reactions to all the things that happen to (and around) her, and her growth as a character is written really well and feels totally real. The world of the nobles around her is also entertaining (although probably would be really tiresome to live in), with constant plotting and scheming within the strict customs of rich society.

I'll definitely be reading the third book set in this world, The Fall of The Kings, soon!

Dec 28, 2011, 8.13 am

Malgudi Days by R.K. Narayan

I really should have read Malgudi Days a long time ago – I'm not sure why I never got around to it. R. K. Narayan is one of India's most famous writers, and this is a collection of his short stories, set in and around the fictional south Indian town of Malgudi. Most of the stories are slice-of-life, set from the perspective of a variety of people, from poor beggars and food vendors to schoolboys to rich nonagenarians. Some of them are touching, some are humorous, some are ironic, and some just are. They work really well together to describe the various kinds of people that make up a small town in India.

18. (a) Narayan's style of writing is really simple and unpretentious, but every word he writes conveys so much. His characters are all really approachable, and they might even seem simple, but it is my opinion that it's really hard to do simplicity well, and no one is better at it than Narayan.

Pretty much all of the stories are about a single minor incident that occurs in the protagonist's life, and how they react to it. A retired security guard receives a letter in the mail and is driven almost insane by the thought of what it might contain. An old gardener has to say goodbye to the house he has worked in for decades. A man takes temporary responsibility for a lost child and dreams about the family he might have had.

One of the most amazing things about Narayan's writing is how much sympathy he can arouse for almost any character in a couple of paragraphs. His stories are often about very different people, often flawed or annoying, but they're inevitably lovable, no matter what stupid decisions they make. I often get unreasonably frustrated with characters that have lapses of judgement, so this is truly a remarkable feat.

The last thing that I wanted to mention was that I recognised one of the stories ("The Missing Mail") from one of my English textbooks from school. I remember really liking the story back then, and was delighted to rediscover it.

Dec 29, 2011, 10.12 am

Tender Morsels by Margo Lanagan

I can't believe I actually liked *Tender Morsels*; 75 pages in, I was convinced that I would hate it. However, it turned out to be quite a good book, although it is uncomfortable to read. (side note: I actually have an autographed hardcover of this book, having chanced upon a remnant of a recent signing in Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville, IL.)

Tender Morsels is generally advertised as a retelling of the Snow White and Rose Red fairy tale, and it does live up to that. It follows a mother and her two daughters, one quiet and one impetuous, and they do encounter a bear. I think that the fairy tale retelling almost does the book a disservice, since the phrase "fairy tale retelling" raises so many different expectations for the reader. I didn't see how the evocation of the Snow White and Rose Red story was important to the book, but that's probably something I'm missing, rather than a fault of the book.

The protagonists of the story are Liga, and her two daughters Branza and Urdda. Liga's first fifteen years of life are quite horrible, she's subjected to constant rape, forced abortions and infanticide from her father, all while being totally sheltered from the outside world. After his death, she is left pregnant and becomes an outcast in her town, and is also treated poorly. (This forms the first 75 pages of the book, and is the reason I thought I'd hate the book.) However, her luck finally changes, and she is transported to a safe version of her world, where she raises her daughters in peace. The rest of the book tells of her journey back to the world where she's from and how she learns to cope with events from her life and trust people again. Her daughters' stories and fates are also explored.

SPOILERS FOLLOW

Liga's story is ultimately sad and heartbreaking, and I wish the book hadn't ended the way it had, with Liga's disappointment. I understand that that was a consequence of Liga having spent twenty five years in her safe world, rather than learning to live with the truth about humanity, however unintended that was. It keeps with the somber tone of the issues the book addresses, but it doesn't make it any less heartbreaking. I was glad that Branza and Urdda were able to get a good ending, though.

I was also made uncomfortable by the controversial "rape as vengeance" scene, but that seemed to be the intent. It also fits in with the tone of the book, though, and I understand why it was there.

SPOILERS END

Overall, an uncomfortable but thought-provoking book, and one I'm glad I read.

Dec 30, 2011, 9.00 am

All books

1. *Cards on the Table* by Agatha Christie
2. *The Secret Adversary* by Agatha Christie
3. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie
4. *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* by Agatha Christie
5. *The Body in the Library* by Agatha Christie
6. *Parker Pyne Investigates* by Agatha Christie
7. *Poirot Investigates* by Agatha Christie
8. *Miss Marple's Final Cases and Two Other Stories* by Agatha Christie
9. *Murder in Mesopotamia* by Agatha Christie
10. *Murder in the Calais Coach* by Agatha Christie
11. *Murder on the Links* by Agatha Christie
12. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie
13. *Thirteen at Dinner* by Agatha Christie
14. *The Labours of Hercules* by Agatha Christie
15. *The Secret of Chimneys* by Agatha Christie
16. *The Boomerang Clue* by Agatha Christie
17. *The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding* by Agatha Christie
18. *Murder in Retrospect* by Agatha Christie
19. *The Clocks* by Agatha Christie
20. *The Tuesday Night Club* by Agatha Christie
21. *The Regatta Mystery* by Agatha Christie
22. *Partners in Crime* by Agatha Christie
23. *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* by Mary E. Pearson
24. *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder
25. *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder
26. *By The Shores of Silver Lake* by Laura Ingalls Wilder
27. *Poirot Loses a Client* by Agatha Christie
28. *The Hero and the Crown* by Robin McKinley
29. *A Countess Below Stairs* by Eva Ibbotson
30. *Odd and the Frost Giants* by Neil Gaiman
31. *A Company of Swans* by Eva Ibbotson
32. *The Star of Kazan* by Eva Ibbotson
33. *Serve the People: A Stir-Fried Journey Through China* by Jen Lin-Liu
34. *Swordspoint* by Ellen Kushner

35. *Hallowe'en Party* by Agatha Christie
36. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver
37. *The Morning Gift* by Eva Ibbotson
38. *The White Mercedes* by Philip Pullman
39. *Relic Master (The Dark City)* by Catherine Fiske
40. *The Case of the Missing Servant* by Tarquin Hall
41. *White Sands, Red Menace* by Ellen Klages
42. *Acacia* by David Anthony Durham
43. *The Other Lands* by David Anthony Durham
44. *The Sacred Band* by David Anthony Durham
45. *The Eye of the World* by Robert Jordan
46. *The Great Hunt* by Robert Jordan
47. *The Dragon Reborn* by Robert Jordan
48. *The Shadow Rising* by Robert Jordan
49. *The Fires of Heaven* by Robert Jordan
50. *Lord of Chaos* by Robert Jordan
51. *A Crown of Swords* by Robert Jordan
52. *The Path of Daggers* by Robert Jordan
53. *Winter's Heart* by Robert Jordan
54. *Crossroads of Twilight* by Robert Jordan
55. *Knife of Dreams* by Robert Jordan
56. *The Gathering Storm* by Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson
57. *Towers of Midnight* by Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson
58. *Mistborn: The Final Empire* by Brandon Sanderson
59. *The Well of Ascension* by Brandon Sanderson
60. *The Hero of Ages* by Brandon Sanderson
61. *The Alloy of Law* by Brandon Sanderson
62. *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin
63. *The Broken Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin
64. *Embassytown* by China Miéville
65. *The Red Necklace* by Sally Gardner
66. *The Silver Blade* by Sally Gardner
67. *Leviathan* by Scott Westerfield
68. *Behemoth* by Scott Westerfield
69. *The Lost Conspiracy* by Frances Hardinge
70. *Gregor the Overlander* by Suzanne Collins

71. *Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane* by Suzanne Collins
72. *The Anybodies* by N.E. Bode
73. *A Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin
74. *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok
75. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien
76. *Dragon Wing* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
77. *Sapphique* by Catherine Fisher
78. *The Summer Tree* by Guy Gavriel Kay
79. *Bone in the Throat* by Anthony Bourdain
80. *The Conquered* by Dafydd ab Hugh
81. *The Courageous* by Dafydd ab Hugh
82. *The Liberated* by Dafydd ab Hugh
83. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg
84. *Lord Foul's Bane* by Stephen R. Donaldson
85. *A Sickness in the Family* by Denise Mina
86. *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* by Catherynne M. Valente
87. *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* by Lizzie Collingham
88. *The Way of Kings* by Brandon Sanderson
89. *The Thief Lord* by Cornelia Funke
90. *The Privilege of the Sword* by Ellen Kushner
91. *Malgudi Days* by R.K. Narayan
92. *Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan

CHAPTER 3

2012 Reading

Books read and acquired in 2012.

January 2012 Summary

Books Read

Two Lives by Vikram Seth

Details

Genre: non-fiction, memoir

Date finished: Jan 2, 2012

Pages: 499

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

Two Lives: A Memoir is the first Vikram Seth book I've read (I seem to be making a habit of introducing myself to authors who primarily write fiction by reading their non-fiction work; the only Barbara Kingsolver book I've read is *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and *On Writing* is the only Stephen King book in the house, although I haven't read that one yet.) I found the title of the book slightly misleading – while the book is certainly about Seth's uncle Shanti and aunt Henny, it's also very much about his relationship with them.

The book is divided into five independent parts, each approaching different facet of the story. It starts off with the young Vikram Seth arriving to live with his aunt and uncle while he attends school in England, and his perceptions of them. Then, we learn about Shanti's life, then Henny's, then their life together. I was expecting the book to be more

narrative than it was; a large portion of it quotes various interviews and letters. Much of the narration that accompanies the quotes seems more like annotation or clarification of context. At first, I found this annoying, but I got used to it.

The story of Shanti and Henny is certainly makes fascinating reading. Shanti is a Hindu from India who studies dentistry in Germany, and Henny is the daughter of the Jewish family he boards with while doing so. However, their love story blossoms in England. Both of them are remarkable people in their own right – Shanti is a much-loved practising dentist, even though he lost one of his arms in World War II. Henny's story is quite tragic; her mother and sister do not make it out of Germany, and she has to face many truths about her family and friends after the war is over. I think her correspondences were the most interesting part of the book – we got an intimate look at how she coped with a tragedy of the magnitude of the Holocaust. She always remained incredibly dignified and restrained, though.

At times, I found myself wishing that the book was a little more focused. It seemed like Seth structured the book around trying to present every bit of information that he had (especially about Henny), rather than build a cohesive narrative. At other times, I appreciated the tangents and extra details about the couple's family and friends.

I also had mixed feelings about the author talking about his own feelings at various points in the book. On the one hand, they made it feel more intimate – he is in fact, writing about the aunt and uncle that he loves and respects, so it's nice to see that come through. On the other hand, some of the things he said seemed superfluous and distracting; for instance, he talks about the different areas of the world and technologies that Germany has had an impact on (including some thoughts on the future.)

January 2, 2012, 7.09 am

Fannie's Last Supper by Chris Kimball

Details

Genre: non-fiction, food, history, cookbook, memoir

Date finished: Jan 6, 2012

Pages: 243

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

I'm a big fan of America's Test Kitchen, and I love reading about food and history, so I was really looking forward to reading Fannie's Last Supper by its host and founder, Christopher Kimball. The book's tagline is "Re-creating One Amazing Meal from Fannie Farmer's 1896 Cookbook", and is (purportedly) about recreating an elaborate dinner party from Victorian-era Boston, based on the recipes of Fannie Farmer, a famous cooking teacher and businesswoman from the time.

About the title – although Kimball was certainly inspired by his discovery of Fannie Farmer's cookbook, I would not go as far as to say his meal was a recreation. He does not seem to respect Farmer as a cook or as a person, which makes for odd reading. His reactions to exact recreations of her dishes range from "inedible" to "truly horrible" to "rather uninspired" to "second rate." (There is the occasional "good", but it is rare.) This means that pretty much all of the recipes were changed quite a bit. A few of the recipes were even sourced entirely from other books, after Farmer was deemed unsatisfactory. This is all fine, but it seemed like false advertising.

The book is peppered with fascinating facts and insights into the world of the 19th century cook. The industrial revolution was changing cooking at an extremely rapid rate, plus domestic servants were no longer common. Kimball likens it to a music aficionado in the late 1990s (p. 193):

who used a turntable for his LP collection while relying on a large group of CDs and then a smattering of digital downloads from iTunes on his MP3 player.

I loved that description (although, what about cassette tapes? that's what I used in the 90s) – I think it's a great analogy.

I think the structure of the book could have been easier to read – part of it deals with the evolution in cooking methods and ingredients in the US, some of it is about how Boston's food culture and how that changed (including random little details like the price of gelatin), some of it is about Fannie Farmer's life, and then there's the story of Kimball's journey to making this dinner, testing recipes, finding silverware, etc. The trouble is that each chapter contains a bit of everything. I think it would've showcased the material far better if it had been better structured, although it is still really interesting.

I also appreciated a lot of the trouble that they went to to make the dinner accurate – mock turtle soup using calf-brains, and making gelatin from calf-feet stand out. It sounded like a horrendous amount of work.

Apparently PBS did a special to accompany the book (or vice versa), also called Fannie's Last Supper. *Here is the trailer for it* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmvg6oEl7pQ>>. I really want to watch it, but I'm not sure how it can be obtained.

Jan 6, 2012, 2.00 pm

Ringworld by Larry Niven

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction

Date finished: Jan 9, 2012

Pages: 342

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

I keep telling myself I need to read more science-fiction, so I decided to make good on that, starting with a classic, Ringworld by Larry Niven. I haven't read any books by Larry Niven before, although Ringworld is part of his Known Space book universe.

Ringworld is about an artificial world, 3 million miles across, that is built in the shape of a ring that spins around a sun (the concept is similar to a Dyson sphere.) Nessus, a Pierson's puppeteer (a cowardly alien species with two heads) leads a motley crew on a top-secret mission to explore it. Louis Wu is a two hundred year old world-famous adventurer, Teela Brown is an extraordinarily lucky twenty year old girl (and Louis's lover), and Speaker-to-Animals is a ferocious Kzinti diplomat.

The book starts off as an exciting adventure, I really enjoyed it up until the point where the expedition actually lands on the Ringworld (halfway through the book.) After that, it got a bit tedious, like Niven didn't know what to do with his characters.

Some of the ideas mentioned and explored in this book are pretty interesting – I enjoyed the discussions about the different kinds of evolutions (what the puppeteer's fight or flight response meant, for example) and how that led to different priorities for different species. I also liked the Ringworld itself, as well as the puppeteer's home world. Teela's "psychic luck" was also an interesting concept, although I found it implausible.

The characters are interesting to start off with, but like I said above, halfway into the book, they get pretty dull. I also found the descriptions of Louis Wu's (constant) sex kind of awful ("she impaled herself" is an awful description.) Also, the writing felt a bit dated; I think our conceptions of space were very different in the 70s.

I probably would not have stuck through this book if it was not part of my 25 book challenge, but I'm glad I did because it's a classic, and at least I've read it now! I probably won't be reading the other books in the series soon, but maybe eventually.

Jan 9, 2012, 8.42 pm

New Spring by Robert Jordan

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy

Date finished: Jan 11, 2012

Pages: 359

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? n/a

Review

The Wheel of Time is a series that I really love, so I knew I would love New Spring even before I started it. New Spring is a prequel to the main Wheel of Time series, featuring the Aes Sedai Moiraine Damodred and Suan Sanche as young women who have not yet been raised to the rank of full Aes Sedai. It also follows the story of al'Lan Mandragoran, the last King of Malkier, who we know in The Wheel of Time as Moiraine's Warder, and how he ended up bonded to Moiraine.

The book assumes that you're familiar with The Wheel of Time, the various organisations, countries, etc. aren't really given that much of an explanation. We meet some familiar faces, primarily in the Aes Sedai – Verin, Elaida, Cadsuane, Sheriam and Leane, among others. It's kind of hard for me to figure out what information was new to us in the book because I read the Wheel of Time wiki so much.

It's definitely interesting to see Moiraine and Suan, both so inscrutable and awe-inspiring in the main series, as young and immature women still finding their way in the world. Their friendship is really affectionate and well-portrayed. Lan is pretty much unchanged, he's still honourable, sensible, dutiful and proud. We get to find out a lot of backstory, for instance why Moiraine was searching for the Dragon Reborn, how Lan and Moiraine ended up trusting each other so much, what the Black Ajah had been up to, the decline of the White Tower starting to show.

Basically, read it if you love The Wheel of Time. If you haven't read The Wheel of Time, read at least the first few books in the series before reading this. Skip it if you don't love The Wheel of Time.

Jan 11, 2012, 2.03 pm

Climbing the Stairs by Padma Venkatraman

Details

Genre: fiction, young adult, coming of age, india, historical

Date finished: Jan 13, 2012

Pages: 243

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I found myself in a bookstore (that had some great bargains) yesterday, and ended up breaking my resolution not to buy any books until I'd read 25 of my old ones. However, in light of recent events, and also in light of today being my birthday, I think that's okay. Climbing the Stairs by Padma Venkatraman was one of the books I bought, especially since I was looking for a few easy reads. This book used to be on my wishlist, but then I decided it sounded a bit too chick-lit for my tastes, but I decided that it would be a quick read and it sounded like fun.

Climbing the Stairs is about fifteen year old Vidya, a member of an orthodox Tamil Brahmin family, who does not want to get married, but instead wants to attend college and make something of herself. It is the early 1940s, and India's independence movement is in full swing, even as World War II rages across the world. Vidya has a liberal family, but when tragedy strikes, she has to move to Madras to her grandfather's home, which is a traditional joint family home. (And of course, she meets a boy there that dashes all her dreams of spinsterhood.)

This story resonated with me more than I thought it would because my grandmother was part of a joint family in Madras (albeit not Brahmin.) The relationships between the various family members (the grandfather being the supreme authority, the older sister in laws being bossy, the family hierarchy) really seemed to ring true. I don't think my grandmother's family was as strict as this one, but I'm not sure.

Vidya is a likeable protagonist (although it's hard to go wrong with a girl that likes books), she knew what she wanted and tried her best to get it. She didn't complain too much, though, or stoop to the petty level of the other women she was surrounded by. I loved the turn that her relationship with Raman took (to say any more would be a spoiler, but I was glad that she didn't have to be "rescued.") I think that her voice and opinions were also very well portrayed – she was a very believable sheltered fifteen year old girl.

I also liked the setting a lot, despite being a fairly lighthearted and simple book, the various factions in India during this very volatile time period were portrayed pretty well. The non-violent Gandhians that believed in ahimsa, the people that believed that independence required violence, the sycophants to the British. There were British police that wanted to stop protests with violence, but there was also a kindly British man.

Overall, a pretty enjoyable and easy read.

Jan 13, 2012, 10.30 am

Elantris by Brandon Sanderson

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy

Date finished: Jan 14, 2012

Pages: 482

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I got Elantris for my birthday yesterday, and immediately dove into it. If you've been reading my blog, you know that I've really wanted to read this for a while. I think Brandon Sanderson is my favourite fantasy writer, and this is his debut novel.

Elantris is about the city of Elantris, which was once radiant and magical, where all of its inhabitants were benevolent, and used their magic to benefit the people. However, Elantris fell ten years ago, and its inhabitants are basically zombies who can still think. People are still being turned into Elantrians, but it is no longer a blessing. The religious zealot kingdom of Fjordell is getting very powerful, and Prince Raoden of Arelon is about to be married to Princess Sarene of Teod, forming an important political treaty between their nations in the hope of resisting Fjordell. However, a few days before their wedding, Raoden is taken by the Shaod and turned into an Elantrian, and Sarene is declared his widow. Now Raoden needs to find hope in the anarchy and despair of Elantris, and Sarene needs to stop Hrathen, the Fjordell priest from converting and subjugating both her adopted kingdom and her home kingdom.

I really liked this book. Sarene and Raoden are both people that you want to root for; they're both intelligent and principled, and very well-matched. I was a bit surprised at how quickly their romance came together at the end (primarily because Sarene is otherwise so sceptical), but other than that, I thought they had great chemistry. Hrathen is also a great point of view character; he's devoted to his faith but also a rationalist. His battle with Sarene over the conversion of the Arelish people was pretty interesting.

As usual with a Brandon Sanderson book, the magic system was very well thought out. As also seems to be the case with his standalone fiction (I'm looking at you , The Alloy of Law), every loose thread is not explained at the end, which is frustrating because now I really want a sequel!

I don't think I can say very much more about this book – I was pretty much completely immersed in the world and didn't get out of it enough to think about what I liked or disliked about it. I'm really excited to read Brandon Sanderson's annotations of Elantris, available for free online.

Jan 14, 2012, 2.20 pm

Warbreaker by Brandon Sanderson

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy

Date finished: Jan 14, 2012

Pages: 588

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

Warbreaker was also one of my birthday presents, and I was really excited to read it. It's interesting that I read this book right after Elantris, because they have a lot of the same concepts. Men undergoing a transformation and being deified, and a princess being promised to a royal of a neighbouring kingdom in a political move. I thought Brandon Sanderson was being a bit repetitive (although he takes the concepts in very different directions in both books), but it was deliberate; he wanted to explore concepts that came up in Elantris, but couldn't due to the direction of the story.

Warbreaker follows two Idrian princesses, Siri and Vivenna. Vivenna has been promised to Susebron, the God King of neighbouring Hallendren, in the hopes that it would avert a war, and she has been studying and preparing for this all her life. However, at the last minute, her father cannot bear to part with her, and instead sends her sister Siri. Vivenna is outraged and goes on an unauthorised mission to rescue her younger sister from her fate. We also follow Lightsong, a Returned god of Hallendren who doesn't believe he is a god, and the mysterious Vasher and his sentient sword, Nightblood.

As usual, there is a lot of political intrigue and sudden plot twists that make an amazing amount of sense in retrospect, but which I never saw coming. Siri and Vivenna are very different from each other (and from all the other Sanderson

female protagonists), and both very likeable. Lightsong reminded me a bit of Oscar Wilde's lazy and frivolous protagonists, but of course he's curious underneath it all. (I loved the revelation of who he was before he Returned.) Vasher is gruff and mysterious, but definitely an interesting person to follow.

Anyway, like the previous review of Elantris, I don't really have much to say. I loved the book.

One cool thing about Warbreaker is that it is available for free on Brandon Sanderson's website, as well as all his previous drafts of the book. This is a really cool, especially for people who want to write books. He also has annotations for each chapter. All of this is available at his Warbreaker portal.

Jan 15, 2012, 11.36 am

Dark Lord of Derkholm by Diana Wynne Jones

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy

Date finished: Jan 16, 2012

Pages: 517

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

I returned to my 25 book challenge with Dark Lord of Derkholm by Diana Wynne Jones. I've been meaning to read more of her books, I really enjoyed Howl's Moving Castle, and I've had this one for a while.

Dark Lord of Derkholm is about a fantasy world that has essentially been turned into a theme park by the evil Mr. Chesney from what seems to be our world. Every year, Chesney's Pilgrim Parties, packaged tours for adventure-seeking people, devastate the world. Basically the entire economy of the world revolves around these tours, which consist of staged adventures including a battle between the Forces of Good and the Dark Lord, attacks by leathery avian creatures, bandits and pirates, a Glamorous Enchantress, treasures guarded by dragons, etc. The inhabitants of the world spend all year trying to make this happen, but resent it thoroughly. However, Mr. Chesney has a powerful demon on his side, and they do not know how to end the contract with him without risking doom.

The Wizard Derk is chosen to play the Dark Lord this year, and the book follows the adventures of him, his family (his wife, two human children and five griffin children) and his menagerie of unusual animals as they struggle to pull it off.

This book is absolutely hilarious, but also makes you feel pretty touched in places. Derk the wizard was a really fun protagonist – I thought he was going to be pretty ineffectual (as did the rest of the wizards), but he dealt with everything really well, despite all the setbacks he kept running into. I loved the unusual family that he has – humans and griffins that consider each other siblings and are treated equally. All the characters were really fleshed out and charming in their own way. This applies to the supporting characters too – Querida the High Chancellor was a lot of fun to read about (I imagine that she looks a bit like Dame Maggie Smith), and so was Scales the dragon.

I thought the concept of the book was pretty awesome, too. It allowed the author to affectionately satirise common fantasy tropes and our perceptions of them, while remaining true to the fantasy genre. I loved it the same way I loved The Princess Bride.

Howl's Moving Castle was pretty great, but after reading this, I've realised that Diana Wynne Jones definitely deserves her reputation.

Jan 16, 2012, 3.15 pm

Fly Trap by Frances Hardinge

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy, young adult, children

Date finished: Jan 18, 2012

Pages: 584

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I was instantly captivated when I read *Fly by Night* by Frances Hardinge, so I was really looking forward to this sequel, *Fly Trap* (Twilight Robbery in the U.K.)

Fly Trap follows the continuing adventures of Mosca Mye, an orphaned 12-year old who has the rare ability to read, her travelling companion Eponymous Clent, a well-known con-artist, and her homicidal goose, Saracen. They have recently (accidentally) helped cause a revolution in the city of Mandelion and run afoul of the powerful Guilds that control the realm. They've been trying to make a living using their conning skills and Mosca's ability to read, but winter is coming, and they're not in a comfortable spot. After they accidentally stumble upon a kidnapping plot, they head to the city of Toll hoping to notify the intended victim and earn a reward. Predictably, things don't end up turning out like they'd hoped and they become embroiled in far larger schemes.

This is another of those books that is labelled "fantasy" simply because it is set in an alternate world, even though it does not contain any magic. The world is really interesting, though. In the previous book, we learned that every hour and day has its own patron saint or god (called "Beloved"), and a child is named in honour of the reigning deity when he or she was born. This book explores this concept even further. The city of Toll takes these names very seriously, as Mosca and Eponymous soon find out.

Just like *Fly by Night*, *Fly Trap* is a self-contained adventure, and I don't think it's necessary to read the previous book in order to enjoy this one. A few familiar faces appear, but their appearances and significance are explained.

Mosca and Eponymous are fun protagonists, and their half-antagonistic, half-affectionate relationship is very endearing. I particularly loved the scene where Mosca makes up some choice insults in order to get Eponymous out of trouble, and his reaction to it. Even though both Mosca and Eponymous would deny having a sense of right and wrong, they definitely do – especially when it comes to saving each other from trouble. Saracen was a hoot (or rather, a honk) as always, but I was a bit disappointed that he wasn't a bit more murderous.

Hardinge is a total delight to read – she loves playing with words, and her descriptions are inventive and charming. I think that she is one of the best young adult writers of today, having also read her *The Lost Conspiracy*. I don't think she's nearly as popular as she should be.

Jan 18, 2012, 9.26 pm

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

Details

Genre: fiction, historical, africa

Date finished: Jan 21, 2012

Pages: 543

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

The Poisonwood Bible is not the type of book I usually read. Generally, most of my reading is escapist – where the world is exciting and people are having a more interesting life than I am, and I want to switch places with them. (I assume they'd probably want to switch places with me too, since they don't know that they're in a book and everything's going to be okay at the end.)

I would definitely not want to switch places with Orleana Price or any of her four daughters. The Poisonwood Bible follows Nathan Price, a zealous and uncompromising Baptist missionary who drags his wife and daughters to the Belgian Congo. They are totally unprepared for what that means, and all sorts of unpleasant surprises ensue. Most of this arises from Nathan's total refusal to let Africa bend him to her will (as he thinks of it – I'd call it being adaptable.) In addition, the Congo is in the midst of gaining independence from Belgium, and major world powers are very interested in controlling the valuable resources of the fledgling new nation.

This book is definitely going to stay with me for a while. I think Kingsolver did an excellent job of depicting life in Africa, although you should take that with a few grains of salt since I've never been there. It did ring true, though. All the characters – Orleana, Adah, Leah, Rachel and Ruth May also seemed like real people, and all very different. I didn't have to look at the chapter headings to see whose viewpoint it was. Ruth May was charming in the way she reported things without understanding what she meant, Adah made a lot of sense as the "crippled" girl that was actually the keenest learner, Leah's devotion to her father was pretty heartbreaking and Rachel was also believable, although I didn't really like her from the start.

I identified most with Adah – her limp, her palindrome poems and her quirky but organised mind made a lot of sense to me.

I didn't know very much about the history of the Congo/Zaire, so the background of the book was fascinating. However, Leah and Rachel seemed to embody extremes on the political spectrum, and although I liked the contrast, I wouldn't take either of their opinions as fact. (I think that they are plausible opinions for the characters, though.) I've seen criticisms that the author was being preachy, but I think it was just Leah's character being preachy and Rachel being a little underdeveloped at the end. I kept hoping that Rachel would redeem herself, but she didn't ever seem to.

There is no neat little bow of an ending, and the characters remain flawed in the end, even though they grow up noticeably. That's why I don't read books like this (general award/prize winning books) often – even though I appreciate them and I think they are masterfully done, they leave me very sad. Please note that I don't mean to insult The Poisonwood Bible by lumping it into an arbitrary category – I think it was unique.

Jan 23, 2012, 9.48 pm

Books Acquired

1. *Fly Trap* by Frances Hardinge – acquired Jan 5, early birthday gift
2. *White Planet* by Ash Silverlock – acquired Jan 10, e-book, review request
3. *Climbing the Stairs* by Padma Venkatraman – acquired Jan 12
4. *Heat Rises* by Richard Castle – acquired Jan 12
5. *The Full Cupboard of Life* by Alexander McCall Smith – acquired Jan 12
6. *The Miracle at Speedy Motors* by Alexander McCall Smith – acquired Jan 12
7. *Every Thing On It* by Shel Silverstein – acquired Jan 12
8. *The Windup Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi – acquired Jan 12, early birthday gift

9. *Elantris* by Brandon Sanderson – acquired Jan 13, birthday gift
10. *Warbreaker* by Brandon Sanderson – acquired Jan 13, birthday gift
11. *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald – acquired Jan 13, birthday gift
12. *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn – acquired Jan 11, meant as a gift for my grandfather
13. *Indian Summer* by Alex von Tunzelmann – acquired Jan 13, meant as a gift for my grandfather
14. *Ship Breaker* by Paolo Bacigalupi – acquired Jan 26, for thingaversary
15. *The Wedding Wallah* by Farahad Zama – acquired Jan 26, for thingaversary
16. *Looking for Jake* by China Miéville – acquired Jan 26, for thingaversary

E-books Acquired

1. *Yseult* by Ruth Nestvold – acquired Jan 22, e-book, member giveaway

Statistics

Pages read: 4400

February 2012 Summary

Books Read

The Wedding Wallah by Farahad Zama

Details

Genre: fiction, india

Date finished: Feb 4, 2012

Pages: 335

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

The Wedding Wallah by Farahad Zama is the third book of a series (starting with The Marriage Bureau for Rich People) set in my hometown, Vizag. No one ever writes books set in Vizag, so this fact alone almost guarantees that I'd love these books. However, they're also actually pretty well-written, have great characters, and more importantly, they have a lot of heart. They remind me a lot of the The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency books by Alexander McCall Smith – slow and somewhat sleepy, but not boring.

Anyway, enough about the series. The Wedding Wallah sees all of our favourite characters return: Mr. and Mrs. Ali's marriage bureau is still doing brisk business, Rehman has still not been cured of his idealism, Pari is still determined to be an independent young woman and Aruna is fully settled into her marriage, although she still helps out at the marriage bureau. We are introduced to a new character, Dilawar, who is from a wealthy and aristocratic family, but hasn't found a bride yet. His family, for whatever reason, believes that the relatively poor Pari would be a good bride

for him, despite her widowed status and adopted son. Meanwhile the Naxalites (terrorists with communist ideologies) are growing increasingly active in the villages surrounding Vizag. Intertwined with these are a few stories from the marriage bureau side of things. And of course, people are falling in love all over the place.

The book is as charming as previous installments, and it left me wanting more, immediately. I'm not sure how much this has to do with my excitement whenever a place I know is mentioned (which happens a lot.) I was especially excited when the bookstore that I bought the book from was mentioned as a place that one of the characters bought books from!

I thought the Naxalite plot was a little too dramatic in comparison with the rest of the book; it was a little jarring. However, it still made sense. I think that these books really do capture Vizag very well. The only flaw that I can find is that the people sometimes seem too idealistic. This book is also slightly more racy than the other books, which was fine, but a tiny bit unexpected. I was also glad that the book addressed a few modern issues – the Naxalites are portrayed fairly, showing both the bad and the good, and I thought that the inclusion of gay rights in India was also a nice touch and a nice nod to the recent decriminalisation of homosexuality.

I'm just frustrated that I don't live in the UK, since that's the only way I can pre-order the next book on Amazon!

Feb 7, 2012, 12.16 pm

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi

Details

Genre: fiction, future, science fiction

Date finished: Feb 4, 2012

Pages: 323

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

Paolo Bacigalupi's novel, *The Windup Girl* has been receiving a lot of press over the last couple of years, and I finally received it for my birthday this year. However, I didn't take it with me to India, and ended up picking up his next book, *Ship Breaker*, a young adult book set in the future, to read on the flight back. I hesitate to call it a dystopia because we've only seen a small portion of the world, which is no worse than some areas of our world today.

Ship Breaker is set in the future, when oil has run out and the world has changed quite a bit. It follows the story of Nailer, a "ship breaker" that works on disassembling and scavenging valuable parts from ancient oil-tankers and other ships that have been beached near New Orleans. (It took me a long time to figure out that this book was set in the U.S., but it's pretty clear.) Nailer and his crew are desperately poor, and have to either work or starve – and Nailer is getting almost too big for his light crew job. He also has an abusive, drug-addicted and violent father at home (which is a shack.) He dreams of working on the big, clean clipper ships of the corporations that buy his scavenge, but that's pretty far-fetched, considering his situation.

He has some hope for things changing when he is the first to find the wreck of a clipper – perhaps he can scavenge enough to make him rich. He does find riches, but he also finds a beautiful girl that's barely alive. And everyone seems to be after her. Predictably, trouble ensues.

I found the worldbuilding and characters in this book really great. The little details about how the world we know has evolved into *Ship Breaker*'s world are delightful, and the world itself is extremely believable. (I was also excited that there were multiple Indian characters! It's hard enough to find one.) I didn't care for the plot as much; it seemed almost too simplistic for such a lovingly detailed world and such well-rounded characters. The book has so many adult

themes for a young adult book – abuse, drugs, loyalty, poverty, desperation, and a lot more – and they are all explored without any sugar coating or oversimplification. I guess I didn't expect the plot to be so straightforward. However, it does bring the characters and world into more focus, and that is a good thing.

I'll definitely be picking up the next installment in this series, *The Drowned Cities*. I also look forward to reading *The Windup Girl* even more now, now that I've seen what Bacigalupi can do.

Feb 7, 2012, 12.16pm

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood

Details

Genre: fiction, future, dystopia, science fiction

Date finished: Feb 4, 2012

Pages: 374

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

I've been working on *Oryx and Crake* for a while, but finally finished it on the plane back to the United States. I received this book for SantaThing, LibraryThing's secret santa program (Thanks, Marie!), so I was especially excited to read this book.

I've only read one Margaret Atwood book before, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which I thought was a great book. (I really need to buy myself a copy at some point.) Even though that was quite a disturbing story, I found *Oryx and Crake* infinitely more horrifying. Perhaps it is because *The Handmaid's Tale* was about a whole system, and told the story of individuals caught in it. *Oryx and Crake* is about the individuals who created the system, and it is much more horrifying when individuals change the course of the world, and you see an intimate portrait of who they are.

The blurb on the back of the book is pretty vague about what the book is about. I think I got a lot from the experience of letting the book unfold without knowing much about it, so I don't want to talk too much about what happens. We follow Jimmy, alias Snowman, in his life after the "flood" that wiped out humanity as he watches over the Children of Crake. Much of the book tells the story of Jimmy and how he ended up in this situation, as well as the stories of Oryx and Crake, as seen through Jimmy's eyes.

The future world is pretty appalling – corporations have secured cities called Compounds where their employees live and work. The rest of the world live in "pleeblands" – dangerous, lawless cities. Corporations dominate the world, using advanced scientific techniques to create animals, pills, self-help tapes – anything that will increase their profit margin and make consumers even more dependent on them.

However, the real focus of the book is on the characters. Jimmy, Oryx and Crake are all characters with serious problems, but it seems like everyone in that world has serious problems by modern day standards. Jimmy makes a very interesting narrator, he seems so hapless (and has terrible survival skills) and stupid, compared to the people he reminisces about. Jimmy the neurotypical, as he is called at one point. Since we only see the other characters through his eyes, we don't know what actually happened and what is just his interpretation of what happened. He is not without his own insecurities, so it is quite probable that his opinions are coloured by them.

I don't think I can say much more about the book without ruining certain plot elements, so I won't say much more. All the characters' psychologies are scarily real, and this book stuck with me for days afterward. I still keep occasionally thinking about parts of it.

I will read *The Year of the Flood*, set in the same world and part of a proposed trilogy, but not until a couple of months have passed. It would make me too sad to read it right away.

Feb 7, 2012, 12.16 pm

River of Gods by Ian McDonald

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction, india

Date finished: Feb 15, 2012

Pages: 588

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I had been looking forward to reading *River of Gods* for a long time; science-fiction set in a future India is certainly a novelty, but it also got rave reviews. I was really excited to get it for my birthday, and it jumped to the top of my reading queue.

The book is set in India of 2047, around the hundredth anniversary of India's independence from the British. India has split into a number of countries (I believe the term is "Balkanisation"), including Awadh, Bharat and Bangla. There has been a drought in all three countries for years, and they are ready to resort to desperate measures for water. We follow nine different viewpoints – a cop and his wife, a civil servant, a gangster, a set designer, two foreign scientists, a journalist and a stand up comedian. Their stories start off very differently (the first 100 pages or so are pretty confusing), but eventually converge in a story that decides the fate of India.

River of Gods is primarily two things – a science fiction story and a book set in India. I think it is a pretty amazing science fiction book, but the setting of India did not feel authentic to me – the details were all somewhat off-kilter. I'll address these two things separately.

First, the science fiction story: The plot was really well-developed and came together well. The AIs ("aeais") were fascinating, and reminded me a bit of the AIs in *Neuromancer*. I was really swept up in the quest to find out what was really going on and how all the characters and their lives fit together, and the conclusion was satisfying and packed an emotional punch. The world was well-realised and consistent. A lot of the fun came from not knowing what lay ahead, so I don't want to reveal any plot points.

Although the world felt real and believable, it did not seem like a future India. A lot of the words and concepts shown to be in everyday use already seem archaic to me. The caste system is already fading away in common parlance, and it is weird that it plays such a large role in Bharat 2047. It also seems a bit implausible that India would have split into Awadh, Bangla and Bharat – even if India were to split up, I don't think that's the configuration it would take. The slang, the choice of names, the way the people acted... it was almost right, but that made the lack of accuracy much more apparent. Although I would have liked the author to do more research, I think I would have even been okay with less research. The India of *River of Gods* was very unsettling.

I was also a bit disturbed by the portrayal of India as an extremely Hindu nation, where Muslims are hated and a fundamentalist Hindu party is such a giant threat. That doesn't match up with my experiences in India, although our politicians are always talking about being more Indian (renaming cities from their British names, for instance) and we do have a couple of very Hindu political parties, I don't think that they have that much influence.

Other nitpicks: the number of sex scenes in this book is totally unnecessary and gratuitous, and pulled me out of the book. Another annoying thing was the sheer number of Hindi words used in the book, a lot of them seemed also totally

unnecessary. I am pretty familiar with Hindi, so I was okay, but I imagine it would be pretty annoying for people to have to look up terms in the glossary every couple of paragraphs. Hindi words are used in place of extremely ordinary words, like “alley”, and a lot of English words are Hindi-ised.

In any case, despite all my quibbles about the setting, I think River of Gods is a great science-fiction book, and I would definitely recommend it on that strength.

Feb 15, 2012, 7.03 pm

There is a Tide by Agatha Christie

Details

Genre: fiction, murder mystery

Date finished: Feb 18, 2012

Pages: 224

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

There is a Tide (also sold as Taken at the Flood) is a Hercule Poirot novel. It's a pretty typical (I mean that in a good way) Christie book, following the devious plots of the Cloade family and interested parties.

While in a club to escape an air raid in World War II, Hercule Poirot overhears a story claiming that a man, Robert Underhay, who has been reported dead was actually intending to fake his own death and live a new life as Enoch Arden. He files it away in his brain as being interesting, and years later, something actually comes of it. Robert Underhay's young widow, Rosaleen, has married Gordon Cloade, who is an incredibly rich man. Unfortunately, he is also soon dead, killed in an air raid. The Cloade family has been dependent on Cloade's money (with his encouragement), and now all of it goes to Rosaleen. Things are complicated by a man named Enoch Arden turning up at the Cloades' home village, Warmesley Vale.

This book has a million twists and turns, most of which I didn't see coming. I read somewhere that Agatha Christie often pulls up new evidence that explains everything at the end – I have never found this to be the case. Every time a new revelation was made, I realised that I should have connected the dots, but of course, my little grey cells are not Poirot's. Each clue is definitely foreshadowed. There are also plenty of red herrings, motives for murder, false alibis... everything that makes a Christie novel fun. I also enjoyed the look at post-World War II British hardships. Definitely recommended.

Feb 19, 2012, 2.40 pm

Passenger to Frankfurt by Agatha Christie

Details

Genre: fiction, thriller

Date finished: Feb 19, 2012

Pages: 207

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

In *There is a Tide*, Poirot remarks to Superintendent Spence that it's always the human interest that gets him. I think that is what I like so much about Agatha Christie's books – her incisive and almost brutal analyses of all the people in her books. This is especially well achieved in her books about murders within families. Unfortunately, that's also what this book lacks.

Passenger to Frankfurt seems to be Agatha Christie's attempt to write a thriller. I am not sure how many of these non-murder mystery books she's written; this is the first one I've read. It follows a global conspiracy to control the world, reviving Nazism along the way. The protagonist is a British diplomat, who is aided by a beautiful female spy.

The book features some traditional Christie trademarks, like the couple falling in love, and some incisive commentary about the players in the conspiracy. However, most of it felt muddled and incomprehensible, and a little dated. I think Christie's brand of sensationalism works really well for small towns, but doesn't translate well to global events. I also didn't really understand how each event led to the next, and there were way too many characters introduced, so I couldn't keep track of who was who. The narrative wasn't cohesive, with viewpoints being switched erratically.

I'd stick to Christie's murder mysteries.

Feb 19, 2012, 2.40 pm

Anathem by Neal Stephenson

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction

Date finished: Feb 21, 2012

Pages: 981

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

I've had several false starts with *Anathem*; I found the beginning pretty hard to get into. There is a lot of new terminology, and it seemed a bit dense. However, once I finally got going, I couldn't stop reading.

Anathem is set on the planet Arbre, in the Concent of Saunt Edhar. Concents are similar to monasteries, but are staffed by people called avouts who are dedicated to research. We follow Fraa Erasmus, a young avout as he prepares to see the outside world for the first time in ten years. As this is happening, people around him have started acting mysterious, and he's a pretty curious fellow. I don't want to say much more for fear of spoilers, but he goes on a pretty epic journey, emotionally, philosophically and physically. The book is plotted tightly and has a very apt ending.

I'm not sure how much my academic background helped me understand this book – I was familiar with a lot of the concepts. The philosophical arguments (or "Dialog"), the rhetoric and the explorations of the nature of the universe/consciousness were pretty breathtaking.

The worldbuilding was extensive – we learned a lot about the history, geography and culture of Arbre, and how it differed across the world. I loved the detailed history of the various chapters and concentrics within the mathic world (the avouts), with sound philosophical backing. It was an extremely immersive experience to read about them. I much preferred the orderly world of *Anathem*'s avout to the more gritty worlds portrayed in Neal Stephenson's other novels (*Cryptonomicon* and *Snow Crash*.)

The characters were well-rounded, and a lot of fun and the relationships between them extremely touching. By the end of the book, I felt like I knew Fraa Erasmus' friends almost as well as he did. It's always extremely satisfying

when a book can balance a consistent and reasonable story with actual heart, and *Anathem* did a great job, especially considering it deals so much with ideas and debate. It would have been really easy for the book to come off as cold, academic and dry, but it never even comes close.

Feb 21, 2012, 4.34 pm

Kick-Ass by Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.

Details

Genre: fiction, graphic novel, superhero

Date finished: Feb 22, 2012

Pages: 144

Format: hardcover

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

Kick-Ass follows Dave Lizewski, an ordinary high-schooler and comic nerd that dreams of being a superhero, and then decides to actually become one. He discovers that it isn't really easy to fight crime as an untrained sixteen year old, but he perseveres.

I watched (and loved) the Kick-Ass movie a while back, so I knew almost exactly what I was getting into with this book. The movie captures the feel of the book very well, even though the events in the book are somewhat different. The movie treats the characters more idealistically than the book. The book reminded me of *Watchmen* a bit, except that the scale is not so epic, and the mood is much less melancholy and much more optimistic.

I always feel a bit nervous about reviewing graphic novels, because I treat them just like any other book, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to. I know that graphic novels have their own conventions etc., but I don't think I've read enough of them to be aware of them yet. I really enjoyed the way Kick-Ass was structured, but I'm not sure if that's just a function of the medium.

Anyway, I did really enjoy the book – it's hilarious, the characters are fun, and even though Dave is extremely fool-hardy; I can't help but admire his perseverance. And of course, Hit-Girl is my favourite character, simply because she is such a badass (I sincerely hope that she never exists in real life, though.)

I should warn potential readers that there is a lot of violence and profanity from children etc, but overall, Kick-Ass is a very well done black comedy. I can't wait to read Kick-Ass 2.

Feb 22, 2012, 1.42 pm

Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi

Details

Genre: non-fiction, memoir, iran

Date finished: Feb 24, 2012

Pages: 343

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

Reading *Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* was not the kind of book that I thought it would be. I assumed that it would be the story of the girls that got together to read every Thursday, and that the mention of *Lolita* in the title was for shock value, since it's such a controversial book. I should have taken the subtitle (*A Memoir in Books*) more seriously, since I think it is a great description. The book is Azar Nafisi's memoir, which includes the story of her Thursday morning classes, and a healthy dose of literary analysis.

Azar Nafisi went from a revolutionary Iranian student in the U.S. to being a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran just after the revolution. She describes how the revolution changed Iran and herself, using liberal comparisons and allusions to the works of Vladimir Nabokov, Henry James and Jane Austen and *The Great Gatsby*. She is extremely frank about her life, even about her initial naivete and her constant confusion about her life.

Once I'd gotten over my expectations of what the book was going to be, I started to enjoy the book. It was still pretty slow reading; I couldn't focus on the book for long stretches. I think it was because of a few reasons. The first is that life under the Iranian regime sounded very tough, and I couldn't take reading about it for too long. Secondly, Nafisi's writing is very poetic, but also quite disjointed and jumps around a lot. Third, she was analysing a few books I hadn't read, and it seemed a bit dense to me. None of these reasons is a bad thing, of course.

I think that Nafisi's way of writing really describes her very well – she frequently mentions being confused about what actions to take next and how to counsel her students, and her writing reflects that. She jumps between different time periods and between her interactions with different people. Her constant allusion to books, passages, quotes, characters, etc. was also really interesting – it is clear that she is a professor of literature through and through. As a person who has read a lot but has never taken a college English class, I found those sections of the book fascinating.

I would have liked to read Henry James' books and *The Great Gatsby* before reading this one, since they're now fully spoiled for me. I would've gotten a lot more out of the analyses. I did enjoy the analysis of *Lolita*, and was disappointed that the "Austen" section didn't really talk much about her books.

Feb 26, 2012, 9.46 pm

E-books Read

White Planet by Ash Silverlock

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction, fantasy

Date finished: Feb 10, 2012

Pages: 50

Format: PDF

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I received an e-book of Ash Silverlock's self published novel, *White Planet*, to review last month. This is the first volume of *The Ice World Chronicles*, a fantasy set in a science-fictional universe (as far as I can tell.)

Rygarth was once a colony world in an interstellar empire, but has been forgotten for some time. There are stories that it used to be a lush, green world, but now it is covered with ice and extremely hostile. Humans survive in camps or giant Iceholds, and there are a few other sentient species on the planet too. Now there are reports that the Cygors

(or Beastmen), who slaughtered humanity in the past, have returned, and the scattered clans of Rygarth have to unite against their common enemy.

We follow several viewpoints – Gideon, a young Hunter of Icehold Tunguska who is setting out on his first hunt, Ellani, the daughter of a mysterious Shaper, Artamon, a visitor from another world with his own purpose, Wadi, the Artificer of Icehold Tunguska, and other camp chiefs and soldiers. They are all well-written and pretty distinct characters, but they are all a bit overwhelming together, especially since everyone seems to be worried about a different threat to the world, and I couldn't tell which ones were the same. The Cygors, the Beastmen, the Aberrents, the Nemesis, the Shapers, the godless Iceholders, the Gnarl, mutants, the dark mistress. This is a lot to digest in just 50 pages.

"A lot to digest" actually summarises the main problem I have with this book – it is so short, but it seems to try and explore every science fiction and fantasy concept out there, and gives everything and everyone multiple names along the way (Cygors/Beastmen, Frost Mark/Everfrost, to name a couple.) There's the interstellar empire, dragons, mutants, telepathic powers manifested in multiple ways, a mysterious master, a mysterious book of spells, five sentient species on this world alone, feuds between all of them, a young man coming of age, a secret that only the leadership knows about. All these avenues are explored through different means, which means there are just more and more mysteries created in every page. It's hard to care about what happens when everything is a mystery and there doesn't seem to be anything to tie it all together.

However, the world is pretty intriguing and the characters are interesting so I'm still going to read the next book and give the author the benefit of the doubt. I assume that there is a good overarching story that makes sense with all these plot threads. . I hope that the next book is either longer or has less viewpoints/concepts, and has some answers.

Feb 10, 2012, 10.16 am

Yseult by Ruth Nestvold

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy, historical, arthurian

Date finished: Feb 12, 2012

Pages: 492

Format: PDF

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I won a PDF of Yseult: A Tale of Love in the Age of King Arthur in the LibraryThing member giveaway a couple of weeks ago. After finishing White Planet, it occurred to me that I had another e-book to read and review, so I opened up Yseult to flip through it and see what kind of a book it was. I'm usually not the biggest fan of romance, even though I love fantasy and historical books, so I wasn't really expecting to get sucked into this book like I was. I started reading, and couldn't stop.

Yseult is a retelling/interpretation/whatever-you-want-to-call-it of the classic Tristan and Isolde story. I was vaguely familiar with the story ("basically Romeo and Juliet"), but only to the extent that I recognise some characters and plot elements. I didn't even know that Tristan was one of Arthur's knights

The book is much more than a love story. It is truly an epic, exploring the conflicts between paganism and Christianity, political maneuvering between the various kings of Britain and Ireland, the wars between themselves and with the Saxons, and a lot more. It reminded me a bit of The Mists of Avalon, although Yseult was much more fun to read.

Anyway, onto an actual description of the book. Yseult the Fair is an Irish ("Erainn") princess descended from the Feadh Ree, the original race of Ireland. She grows up in a time where Christianity is trying to make inroads into

Ireland, and has already taken over much of Britain. The Feadh Ree, who were once universally respected, are even being attacked by some Gaul kings. War is everywhere, and any available peace seems to be temporary. Yseult tries to make the best of her situation, defending her home when necessary. Along the way, she meets Drystan, and falls in love with him. However, for political and personal reasons, she agrees to be married to his father Marcus, one of the Kings of Dummonia. She can never forget Drystan though, and he cannot forget her, either.

Both Yseult and Drystan are well-rounded and utterly likeable characters. I couldn't help but root for them, even as they spiraled into the unavoidable tragedy that is their story, and made decisions that I knew were going to end badly. I never doubted the intensity of their love, even though I (and they) recognised that it was a terrible idea. I'm generally pretty unromantic, and even I felt this way.

But as I said above, Yseult isn't just a love story. It's the story of Yseult the Fair, which includes a love story, but also includes all the stories of all the other people in her and Drystan's life – an amazing supporting cast, including Arthur and a few people associated with his story, Patriac (who I didn't realise was St. Patrick until I read another review of this book), Yseult the Wise, Cadur, and of course, Kurvenal and Brangwyn. All of them change and grow extremely believably. The religious conflicts are very well-portrayed and almost unbiased, demonstrating the inevitability of change and the futility of fighting against it. It was also very interesting to read about the political side of things, shifting loyalties, values or lack thereof and the kinds of risks taken. Yseult also sounds pretty historically accurate, and it was pretty fun to read about fifth century British and Irish civilisation and traditions.

Oh, and why is this a fantasy, and not just historical? The Feadh Ree and their descendants have one or more of three magical powers, the power of knowing, the power of calling, and the power of changing. These magical abilities do not dictate the course of the story, they just help enhance it.

This book is only available in English on Kindle right now (for the very reasonable price of \$4.95), and I urge you to read it! The author says that she has plans to release it in paperback, and I'm definitely going to buy myself a copy when she does.

Feb 14, 2012, 2.01 pm

Firstborn by Brandon Sanderson

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction

Date finished: Feb 17, 2012

Pages: 44

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

My latest reads are Firstborn and Infinity Blade: Awakening, both by Brandon Sanderson, and I think e-books only. I bought them for the Kindle application on my Mac and read them today. I don't think I'm going to review them – they were both so short (44 and 112 pages, respectively), and just fun reads.

Feb 18, 12:56am

Infinity Blade: Awakening by Brandon Sanderson

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy, tie-in

Date finished: Feb 17, 2012

Pages: 112

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

My latest reads are Firstborn and Infinity Blade: Awakening, both by Brandon Sanderson, and I think e-books only. I bought them for the Kindle application on my Mac and read them today. I don't think I'm going to review them – they were both so short (44 and 112 pages, respectively), and just fun reads.

Feb 18, 12:56am

Dragon Time and Other Stories by Ruth Nestvold

Details

Genre: fiction, short stories, fantasy

Date finished: Feb 24, 2012

Pages: 91

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

This book contains four short stories: Dragon Time, Wooing Ai Kyarem, To Act the Witch, and Princes and Priscilla. Overall, I thought that it was a pretty strong collection. I was a bit surprised by the fact that all the stories had a strong element of romance to them, but that's probably because I went into the author's novel, Yseult expecting a lot more romance than there was, and that skewed my expectations.

I was pretty impressed with the range of settings described in Dragon Time and Other Stories. The titular story is set in a place like medieval Germany, Wooing Ai Kyarem is set in what seemed like Mongolia and Genghis-Khan inspired, and To Act the Witch is set in 17th century England. Nestvold was able to capture very different feels in all the stories, and I really enjoyed that.

I thought that To Act the Witch was the weakest of the stories; the events of the story were too big to be adequately conveyed in such a short story. It felt a bit rushed and not entirely believable. I still enjoyed it, though. Dragon Time was a fun story, although it was a bit too romantic for me. Wooing Ai Kyarem was one of my favourites; I liked Ai Kyarem and her determination a lot. Princes and Priscilla was my other favourite, I also loved Priscilla's way of taking matters into her own hands, and the humour of the story.

Feb 25, 2012, 11:09 pm

If Tears Were Wishes And Other Short Stories

Details

Genre: fiction, short stories, fantasy

Date finished: Feb 24, 2012

Pages: 42

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

This book had three stories: Feather and Ring, Woman in Abaya with Onion, and If Tears Were Wishes. These are all set in the modern day and feature American women protagonists, but are set in different countries.

Feather and Ring follows Lindsay, a game designer whose marriage and career is falling apart. While visiting Taiwan, she meets a mysterious woman who just might be a goddess. This is a pretty simple and endearing story, and I liked it. I'm not quite sure if I understood the second story, Woman in Abaya with Onion, but I enjoyed it all the same. It follows Haley, a young woman that has a series of hallucinations of previous massacres in the places that she visits, even as she falls in love with a young Egyptian man. It was a bit more ominous than Nestvold's usual style.

If Tears Were Wishes was probably my favourite of the three stories. It follows a pair of twins whose tears grant wishes. One of the twins, Brooke, is kidnapped to take advantage of her power, and the other, Crystal vows to find her. Things get pretty interesting since each of them has the power to grant wishes. I loved the ending, too.

Feb 25, 2012, 11:09 pm

Never Ever After: Three Short Stories

Details

Genre: fiction, short stories, fantasy

Date finished: Feb 25, 2012

Pages: 27

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

I'll review the three stories in Never Ever After one-by-one.

A Serca Tale: In a lot of stories, heroes are portrayed as universally likeable. Every woman wants him, and every man wants to be him. But what if there's a woman that doesn't want him, but has been promised to him by people that assume she does? This story is set in an Eriu similar to that of Yseult, so I enjoyed the familiarity. I wish that the heroine hadn't fled one man only to end up with another, but I suppose it's the freedom of choice that matters. I did enjoy the story, though.

King Orfeigh: I really enjoyed this story, which tells of a king who has lost his wife to the faerie king, and has been trying to find her and win her back. It's written in the second person, which I found kind of jarring at first, but got used to pretty quickly. The story is heartfelt and touching.

Happily Ever Awhile: This story explores Cinderella's life after she marries her young Prince Charming and lives "happily ever after." Being married to a prince has its drawbacks – he has to rule a kingdom, and lead its men to war if there is one. Ellie manages to find happiness, though. Happily Ever Awhile is a fun story, and manages to balance the fairy tale and the realistic quite well.

Overall, a great collection of stories!

Feb 25, 2012, 11:09 pm

Looking through Lace by Ruth Nestvold

Details

Genre: fiction, science fiction

Date finished: Feb 25, 2012

Pages: 55

Format: Kindle for Mac

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

Looking Through Lace is the story of Toni, a xenolinguist who is assigned to work with a first contact team. She's been relegated to doing grunt work until now, and is really excited for the opportunity to prove herself.

The alien world in Looking Through Lace is fascinating – although the inhabitants are descended from humans, they have a unique history and culture. The women speak an entirely different language among themselves that the men are not allowed to learn, and Toni is determined to figure out how and why that happened. However, she has a jealous senior colleague and the affections of an attractive native (who just happens to be in a group marriage) to contend with.

I enjoyed reading a science-fiction story by Nestvold; all the other work I've read by her has been fantasy. She keeps up the excellent worldbuilding and characters. I found the revelations concerning the history of the world very interesting. The antagonist xenolinguist seemed like a bit of a caricature, but the interesting alien world more than made up for it.

Feb 25, 2012, 11:09 pm

Books Acquired

1. *Anything Goes* by John Barrowman – acquired Feb 4, birthday gift.
2. *Cryptonomicon* by Neal Stephenson – acquired Feb 4, birthday gift.
3. *India Becoming* by Akash Kapur – acquired Feb 15, early reviewer win.
4. *Cooking at Home with Pedatha* by Jigyasa Giri and Pratibha Jain – acquired Feb 15.

E-books Acquired

1. *Firstborn* by Brandon Sanderson – acquired Feb 17, Kindle for Mac.
2. *Infinity Blade: Awakening* by Brandon Sanderson – acquired Feb 17, Kindle for Mac.
3. *Never Ever After* by Ruth Nestvold – acquired Feb 17, Kindle for Mac.
4. *If Tears Were Wishes* by Ruth Nestvold – acquired Feb 17, Kindle for Mac.
5. *Dragon Time* by Ruth Nestvold – acquired Feb 22, Kindle for Mac.
6. *Looking Through Lace* by Ruth Nestvold – acquired Feb 25, Kindle for Mac.
7. *For the Love of the Gamer* by N. Primak – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
8. *When I Woke Up I Knew I Was Dead* by N. Primak – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
9. *Committed: A Short Story* by N. Primak – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
10. *For Mother: A Short Story Collection of Two* by N. Primak – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
11. *The Emperor's Edge* by Lindsay Buroker – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
12. *In Her Name: Empire* by Michael R. Hicks – acquired Feb 28, Kindle for Mac.
13. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
14. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
15. *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
16. *The Hand of Andulain* by Aaron Mahnke – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
17. *The Awakened: Book One* by Jason Tesar – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
18. *Fantasy & Science Fiction, Stories on the Nebula Ballot 2011* – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
19. *Brimstone* by Alan Skinner – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
20. *The Magic of Windlier Wood* by N.R. Williams – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
21. *Dominion* by Daryl Chestney – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
22. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
23. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
24. *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
25. *Emma* by Jane Austen – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
26. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* by Elinore Pruitt Stewart – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
27. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
28. *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
29. *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
30. *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* by Jules Verne – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
31. *The Iliad* by Homer – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
32. *The Odyssey* by Homer – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
33. *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
34. *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
35. *White Fang* by Jack London – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.

36. *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* by Jules Verne – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
37. *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
38. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
39. *Legon Awakening: Book One* by Nicholas Taylor – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
40. *In the House of Five Dragons* by E D Lindquist – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
41. *The Unfinished Song: Initiate* by Tara Maya – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
42. *Anvil of Tears* by E D Lindquist – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
43. *Rojuun* by John H. Carroll – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
44. *Blue Fire and Ice* by Alan Skinner – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
45. *Endospore* by R. A. Wilson – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
46. *The Weight of Blood* by David Dalglish – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
47. *Unfiltered* by Stefan Ellery – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.
48. *Sapphire of the Fairies* by Richard S. Tuttle – acquired Feb 29, Kindle for Mac.

Statistics

Pages read: 4443

March 2012 Summary

Books Read

Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert A. Heinlein

Details

Genre: fiction, science-fiction

Date finished: Mar 1, 2012

Pages: 414

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

After my Ringworld foray, I was a bit wary of the other two classic sci-fi novels on my list. Finally, I plucked up my courage and dove into this book.

Stranger in a Strange Land starts off well. It appears to be a fun science-fiction story about a human raised among the Martians that returns to Earth and has a huge cultural shock while having to deal with all of Earth's bureaucracy. I really enjoyed the descriptions of the Martian civilisation and how it differs from ours, and the plots of the administration to make the protagonist, Valentine Michael Smith, sign over his rights. Unfortunately, this part only lasts for the first couple of hundred pages or so.

SKIP THE NEXT PARAGRAPH TO AVOID SPOILERS:

Once Valentine Michael Smith gets accustomed to Earth and its strange ways (or as the book says, once he groks Earth), he takes the logical next step of... starting a cult! Of course, this cult is the right one for Earth's people, one which teaches them awesome mind powers that means work is unnecessary and also gets rid of jealousy and possessiveness. Everyone has sex with everyone else, except of course, homosexuality is utterly wrong. The highest value in his society is "growing closer" through sex, but men get closer with other men by encouraging the women that they have sex with to have sex with other men. (Presumably Michael's amazing mind powers prevents sexually transmitted diseases, since he seems to be able to control his body utterly.) And in the end, after he sacrifices his physical form and his cult eats his flesh, he's revealed to be an incarnation of the Archangel Michael!

END SPOILERS

Okay, so I thought this book was a bit absurd. I did think that it was going to be hard sci-fi, and in my opinion, it wasn't (although I don't think that's what kept me from enjoying it.) Heinlein can write pretty well, as shown by the first part of the book, but the book ended up devolving into preachy philosophical monologues (all delivered by the men, while the women say "I understand now, dear! Can I get you some food?") The character of Jubal seemed like a Mary Sue stand-in for Heinlein; he's a writer who writes "bad pulp fiction" but knows that it is trash, but he's also a doctor and a lawyer and the only person that understands Valentine Michael Smith.

Also, I'm usually very forgiving of old books being representative of the prevailing morals of their time, but still, this book is incredibly sexist. Like I said above, the men always need to explain things to the women, the women spend their days mostly in swimsuits (or later, naked), the women are always concerned about providing food to the men (or are rebuked with threats of "spanking", all in good fun, of course.) There's a disturbing statement about rape ("nine times out of ten, it's the woman's fault") that's said by a woman.

The homophobia was also a disappointment. For a story that preaches free love and "sex isn't just about babies, it's to grow closer to people" to be so acutely homophobic seemed like a huge cop-out. I've heard this book described as visionary for its message of sexual liberation and anti-bigotry, but then it's homophobic! I would've forgiven it if the topic of homosexuality had not been addressed at all.

I'm glad I read it, though. It's good to read books I absolutely don't agree with, once in a while. And Heinlein is still a way better writer than Larry Niven.

March 2, 2012, 3.35 pm

The City & The City by China Miéville**Details**

Genre: fiction, murder mystery, fantasy

Date finished: Mar 3, 2012

Pages: 312

Format: paperback

Owned Pre-2012? yes

Review

The City & The City is the third China Miéville book that I've read, each different genres. Perdido Street Station was a steampunk/fantasy, Embassytown was science-fiction, and The City & The City is a police procedural. Each of them is pretty uniquely Miéville, though – his imagination is incomparable, and I love how he dabbles in different genres and manages to retain his voice.

As I mentioned, *The City & The City* is a detective story, somewhat noir inspired. However, it's set in the city-states of Beszel and Ul Qoma, somewhere on the edge of Europe. Beszel and Ul Qoma are intertwined cities that are completely independent from each other. The nearest example I can think of is Toll-by-Night and Toll-by-Day in *Fly Trap*. They are located in the same physical location, but some buildings/streets/locations belong to Beszel and some belong to Ul Qoma. Their culture, language, economic status etc. are very different. Residents of each city are trained to ignore the other city's sights, sounds and smells. "Unseeing", "unhearing" etc. are taught to children from a young age. If they break these laws, a shadowy force called Breach descends upon them, and they are never seen again. Tourists and children are allowed some leeway (tourists are deported.)

In this mad world (which is part of our own modern day world), Inspector Tyodor Borlú of the Beszel Extreme Crimes Unit discovers a corpse of a dead woman. However, she turns out to be from Ul Qoma, and seems to have made enemies among powerful people in both cities while investigating the legend of the mysterious, all-controlling third city, Orciny. Borlú can't resist the mystery and goes above and beyond his duties to investigate this murder.

The worldbuilding in this story is absolutely fantastic. I find it utterly implausible that humans in our current world would put up with the absurd constraints of these two cities, but even so, the world is very well-thought out. I would have expected to have a lot of questions about how the logistics of this worked, but Miéville has laid out a very detailed (and very bureaucratic) world. And of course, there are the obvious unificationists, the hardcore nationalists, the conspiracy theorists, etc. Miéville mentions the myths surrounding the formation of Beszel and Ul Qoma many times, but never actually explains it. I wish that these cities were set on an alien planet (Bas-Lag from his other books, maybe?) or something, the familiarity of our world (email, planes, American embassies) made the cities really jarring.

The murder mystery and the conspiracy were well-thought out and written (although I did suspect the murderer), and I was pretty surprised by some of the revelations (in a "I should've seen that! How clever!" way.) I enjoyed the characters, although they seemed to be stock police types from TV shows (with much more profanity.) As usual, it's hard to empathise with Miéville's characters – I read the book for the ideas.

I'm still not sure if this book had any fantasy elements – they are hinted at, but I don't think they were ever made explicit.

The ending of the book left me a bit annoyed and confused – I thought it was a bit of a letdown after the strength of the rest of the book. I don't want to say more about it, but that's probably the main reason that I didn't absolutely love this book.

March 4, 2012, 5.27 am

E-books Read

Committed: A Short Story by N. Primak

Details

Genre: fiction, short story

Date finished: Mar 1, 2012

Pages: 18

Format: Kindle

Owned Pre-2012? no

Unreviewed

When I Woke Up I Knew I Was Dead by N. Primak

Details

Genre: fiction, short story

Date finished: Mar 1, 2012

Pages: 18

Format: Kindle

Owned Pre-2012? no

Unreviewed

The Emperor's Edge by Lindsay Buroker

Details

Genre: fiction, fantasy, mystery

Date finished: Mar 3, 2012

Pages: 319

Format: Kindle

Owned Pre-2012? no

Review

The Emperor's Edge is the first full novel (the paperback is 319 pages) that I read on my new Kindle, so that's pretty exciting. I went on a free fantasy novel download spree as soon as I got it, and this was one of the books I got.

This book is marketed as a "high fantasy set in an era of steam." I really enjoyed the setting; it was a nice change from the usual medieval-inspired fantasy worlds. (Mistborn: The Alloy of Law had a similar world, although we saw the world in its medieval state in the previous Mistborn trilogy.) The protagonist is Amaranthe, an enforcer (police officer) who suddenly finds herself on the wrong side of the law through no fault of her own. She assembles a crew of misfits (also like in the Mistborn Trilogy) to help her find out what's going on and perhaps help defeat some evil forces.

This was a fun book – it is written in a lighthearted style but still has plenty of heart. The gang of misfits was also extremely lovable – there's Books, the drunk professor, Maldynado the preening dandy with a heart of gold, Sicarius, the extremely deadly assassin and Akstyr, the sullen ex-gang member teenager that can also do magic. Even though I thought they were all a bit crazy for going along with Amaranthe's plan, I think that's part of their characters – they're all smart people that feel underutilised.

I also thought Amaranthe was a great protagonist. It's refreshing to have a fantasy novel that has a non-magic user protagonist. Magic doesn't actually play very much of a role in the story; it's just there. Amaranthe is the team's coordinator and leader, but what she's really good at is managing people and skills, and coming up with ideas. She's a competent fighter, but what she's really good at is talking people into doing things for her. She reminded me a lot of Nate Ford from *Leverage*, both in her role in the team and that she's an ex-official good guy doing good things using illegal methods. I also liked the fact that Buroker refrained from introducing any major romantic subplots while exploring various characters being attracted to each other.

Another exciting thing about the book was Amaranthe's plan to save her empire. Let's just say that it involved economics, which was pretty unusual.

This is a planned six-book series, out of which three are out. I really want to read *Dark Currents* and *Deadly Games* right away, but will probably hold off on it until I get through some more books in my pile. I'm looking forward to seeing the universe of the books explored some more – the magic system and the neighbouring countries especially. I

was also a bit dubious that these characters will stay in a team, and I think Buroker addresses that in the next couple of books.

March 4, 2012, 4.47 am

Books Acquired

None yet.

E-books Acquired

1. *Pirates of Mars* by Chris Gerrib – acquired March 2, Kindle, \$2.99.
2. *Loki* by Mike Vasich – acquired March 3, Kindle.
3. *On the Origin on Species* by Charles Darwin – acquired March 3, Kindle.
4. *Neverdark* by C.S. Einfeld – acquired March 4, Kindle, member giveaway.

Statistics

Pages read: 1079

Money spent: \$2.99

Statistics

As of March 4, 2012:

Physical books read: 21

E-books read: 11

Physical books acquired: 20

E-books acquired: 53

Pre-2012 books (BOMBS) read: 13

Total pages read: 9922

Total money spent (March and onwards): \$2.99

CHAPTER 4

Indices and tables

- `genindex`
- `modindex`
- `search`