



Phoenix and Ashes

Mercedes Lackey

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In this dark and atmospheric rendition of the Cinderella fairy tale, an intelligent young Englishwoman is made into a virtual slave by her evil stepmother. Her only hope of rescue comes in the shape of a scarred World War I pilot of noble blood, whose own powers over the elements are about to be needed more than ever."A dark tale full of the pain and devastation of war...and a couple of wounded protagonists worth routing for." —**Locus**

Phoenix and Ashes Details

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M.M. Strawberry Reviews says

After being disappointed by 'Gates of Sleep', Phoenix and Ashes perked me right up. It was cool to see that Eleanor was a Fire Master, and I think 'Fenyx' was a clever name to choose for Reginald. Setting this against the backdrop of WWI also worked rather well, and overall I'd recommend this book, but not without reading 'Serpent's Shadow' first.

Jannah (Cloud Child) says

4.5

Much much more satisfying than my last read of this author

Unlike the other books I've read by her so far this one seems more fully fleshed out in terms of character development and motivations, plot continuity, and the climax/ ending is much more satisfying (usually this is my biggest problem with her work).

Eleanor Robinson is a young aspiring scholar in early 1900s (something I love about Lackey is her female characters are always defying convention in some form) who means to study in Oxford, despite women not receiving a degree. Yet her dreams are dashed when her father remarries. Her life becomes less important than her stepmothers and her stepsisters. After his death she learns of Alison her stepmother's earth magic, when the latter realises Eleanor still has legal right of inheritance. She is forced under spell to become a slave (in a pretty gruesome way) for her step family, with everyone in the village spelled to forget who she is. Then WW1 strikes and slowly she discovers her own fire powers under the guidance of her Godmother who has sought her out again. She discovers her stepmothers conspiracy against her childhood friend and hero Reggie, an air master who has come back from the war battered with shell shock and something worse. As she works against the spells that bind her, she attempts to protect him from the evil of her step mothers plan. Will she be discovered..will she be strong enough to fight her? Dun dun dunnn

I might say this a lot, but I really love how the author combines elemental magic and fairy tales with true history in a way that highlights lots of big and little details bringing that period to life. There are so many details of the change in women's status, appearance, the deaths, the horrors and psychological damage, the rationing, class hierarchy, sexism etc which I fully appreciated.

In terms of characters there is still a black and white element to them, the bad are evil with no redeeming qualities, like Alison. I do find it interesting how she keeps portraying the Wizard of London in such a way that he seems to be so toff like to the point of idiocy in ignoring someone may be a bad seed because they sound like peerage.

Niggles aside this was a long and satisfying story.

Kat Hooper says

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature. Life's too short to read bad books!
<http://www.fantasyliterature.com/reviews/>

Each of Mercedes Lackey's ELEMENTAL MASTERS novels is a stand-alone fairytale retelling. Some of the novels have overlapping characters, but you can read these books in any order. The fourth book, *Phoenix and Ashes*, is a mostly pleasant Cinderella story set in England during The Great War. Maya, the Indian doctor from *The Serpent's Shadow*, is a minor character. I listened to Michelle Ford narrate the audio version of *Phoenix and Ashes* (Audible Studios). She is perfect for this tale.

Unlike some of the other ELEMENTAL MASTERS stories, *Phoenix and Ashes* stays pretty close to the source material; you can tell this is a Cinderella story. Eleanor Robinson's father is killed during WW1 and Eleanor is left living in the house she grew up in with her socially-climbing evil stepmother and two stepsisters. They cast a spell on Eleanor and make her their slave while they attend teas and balls. Eleanor's "fairy godmother" is a local witch who helps Eleanor develop her own magical skills. Her helpful woodland creatures are the salamanders that usually accompany fire mages in Lackey's ELEMENTAL MASTERS books. Most interesting is Prince Charming — a young soldier who was sent home with "shellshock."

Lackey does a nice job of portraying the horrors, the deprivations, and the massive amount of death that The Great War caused. We see an England that is nearly devoid of healthy adult men within a certain age range. Women were running the farms and businesses. German submarine blockades of merchant ships meant that people were hungry. So many of the English soldiers never came home, and those who did were maimed and/or afflicted with PTSD, a brain disorder that people didn't believe in until recently. Lackey shows us the scorn that the military held for those who suffered from "shellshock" and also the way they were slow to adapt to the Germans' technological advances. A few times Lackey attempts to bring in some socialist opposition to the war, which could have been really interesting and informative, but this is dealt with so quickly and superficially that it was of no value.

As in the other ELEMENTAL MASTERS books, the evil villains are totally over-the-top sadists, making them seem like caricatures rather than real people. Eleanor's stepmother is so hilariously bad that it's hard to take her seriously. In contrast, the protagonists always display surprisingly modern ideas for their time. They're always progressive feminists who despise the class structure they were born into. A little more diversity and nuance to Lackey's characters would be nice.

Still, for a fluffy fantasy read, *Phoenix and Ashes* is mostly entertaining. It's easy to sympathize with Eleanor's plight, cheer when she manages to win little victories over her evil stepmother, and feel excited knowing that she'll triumph in the end. Unfortunately there is a long odd section in which Eleanor learns about passion, balance and responsibility from the creatures on Tarot cards in some sort of dreamland. This was bizarre and boring and didn't feel like it fit in an ELEMENTAL MASTERS novel since, I think, Tarot has not been mentioned as related to this magic system before. The ending of the story, when Eleanor gets revenge, was also abrupt and not especially satisfying. Sort of like my ending to this review.

Alienor says

This one is a retelling of Cinderella.

Again, I will have to complain at the lack of consistency. Evil stepmother does away with father... without making sure he changed his will?? Seriously? Evil stepmother casts a curse on stepdaughter (pretty gruesomely) to make sure no one recognizes her... while her godmother, a minor witch still lives in the

village and knows what's going on - and does nothing? The Masters of London do not feel the taint of evil coming from stepmother? Etc etc

Also Ellie (the heroine) is aggravatingly whiny - maybe a counterpoint to what is to come, to the horror of war.

As with almost every Elemental book, I feel things could be improved with just a little COMMUNICATION. Solutions, in the shape of other Masters, are usually around the bend, yet no one puts their heads together even though everyone smells a rat...

On the other hand, the research into the specific horror of World War 1 - the overwhelming number of deaths, the mutilations, the not yet called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the trenches... - and Ellie's research in the Tarot made it all more palatable to me than the Gates of Sleep.

Vivienne says

I could not sleep one night and so started to listen to this audiobook on my MP3 player. I decided that I would continue with it as my audiobook-on-the-go for moments like this or at the gym.

Unlike others in the series I got through this quite quickly and felt it was the best so far in the series.

Sabrina Barnett says

I've read a million (ish) of Mercedes Lackey's books, burning through them with especial zeal when I was in middle and high school, and, well, they're all kinda the same and, well, that's kinda awesome. These are not deep or Earth-shattering books, but they are warm and companionable reads, with a focus on kindness and valuing intellect that may feel schmaltzy to some, but always felt like a nice place to visit, particularly as a vulnerable pre-teen and teenager. Lackey always tells her fairy tales with a great respect for the tenacity of her female characters, and throughout her work does a great job creating representation for gay and bi characters, as well as crafting worlds where animals are treated with utmost respect. This is a nice quick read (WWI plus magick plus Cinderella retelling), and is gentle and easy in the best of ways: here, the heroine gets her happy ending, and that's nice, sometimes.

CatBookMom says

Some interesting information about the Tarot, as well as sobering background about the effect of the war in the trenches on the British soldiers and their families.

CatBookMom says

An extremely good version of Cinderella. Lots of sobering background about the effects of WWI on the small towns of England, and the troops in the mud in France.

Jacqueline says

Of all the books in the Elemental Masters series this was my favorite. It is a retelling of Cinderella set in the Victorian era in England. This book follows the traditional fairy tale more than the other books in the series, and that might have been part of the magic to me. It is interesting to see all the unique ways that the author has incorporated the traditional parts of the Cinderella story into this much darker tale of magic.

Like all of the books in the Elemental Master series this book can stand on its own. If you are thinking of reading just one of this series, this is the one to go with.

Rebalioness says

Ok, M. Lackey has three writing styles. One, she doesn't like it and has to meet a deadline. Two, she likes what she's doing, but she doesn't have it fleshed out. Three, she has a full story and all the time she wants. This one is a number three.

It's one of the longer Elemental Masters. It's easily the size of "Wizard of London" twice over. This is her Cinderella, set in 1916, between an English farmgirl and a wounded pilot. Both characters are fleshed out nicely. Usually the 'prince' in a fairy tale is just there as a placeholder or a plot point, to complement the 'beauty' but this one has his own character. The 'beauty' is also far more resilient than typical for a fairy tale princess.

This takes a while to get through, but this one was worth it.

Elizabeth S says

This is the Cinderella one. I am amazed how Lackey is able to flesh out traditional fairy tales, mix them with her Elemental Magic system, and then place it in the real world such that it fits plausibly.

I also like that the villains make plans, but aren't always able to execute them. The good-guys, even minor characters, do things to adjust the plans at various times throughout the book. In most stories, the villains seem unstoppable until the very end. But in this series, the villains have setbacks and weaknesses just like everyone else.

The only down-side, to me, of the series is that each book has some soap-box issue that gets repeatedly pontificated on. In this one, it is how horrible war is and the "old men" who are running the war don't realize what the young men are going through. To me, at least, it is overbalanced in the story. I wouldn't say that the author goes on and on about it, but it does get brought up over and over. And over.

Jill Furedy says

So the elemental masters can join the dark side. There were lots of dark beasties in this one, which was different, though not nearly as maliciously fun as it could have been; and for a while I thought Alison was

going to be the most challenging villian yet (I am reading the series in order, though there seems no particular reason to do so as they all stand alone perfectly well). But then the hemming and hawing started, and Lady Virginia shows up to throw in her curve ball, and the evil gets distracted trying to insinuate herself into the rich family and get her daughters married off. So there went any previously built up tension, and the evil hobbles along until it gets its big moment at the end of the book where she gets motivated to refocus on the baddies and not the social niceties. Yet again, the action is piled into the last few pages.

I liked Eleanor nearly as much as I liked Rose in the first book. There was even a little bit of developing romance in this one instead of the romance being pried into the storyline because it was expected. I could have done with more scenes in the meadow, and especially more of Eleanor having to look out for Reggie (and him being aware of it would help too!). But then that also fizzled out in the middle of the book, for what appeared to be a "Sophie's World" inspired series of lessons about the Tarot deck, wherein they teach the character and us about the tarot and its hitherto unmentioned connection to the elemental masters by bashing us over the head with cute vignettes serving only to educate us and not move the story forward in the least. Maybe that part annoyed me a little. And no one else had this many lessons in understanding every possible interpretation of all the elements before actually learning useful stuff...was Eleanor less powerful than the others or why on earth did it take her so long to get anywhere? They did try to connect the dots, by bringing up incidents later where 'she'd never have pulled this off if she hadn't studied other elements besides her own'. But it seemed so concocted and inorganic when brought up in that manner.

Sarah and Lady Virginia were interesting, but never developed, as was the mysteriously introduced Smith who then vanished for the rest of the book. Did I miss something there? Maybe her story is told elsewhere? I liked Dr. Maya's appearance early in the book, but she reappears at the end for no real purpose. Reggie on the other hand, is missing from the end of the book, though he's referred to by Eleanor. We hear nothing from his voice. We know about his leg, how about his mental state? And I could have done without the last two paragraphs which made me think of a sitcom that is required to end with laughter. And laughter that I didn't connect to at all...what was so funny?

But I liked the war story being tied into the fairy tale, I liked the circumstances of Eleanor's servitude and of the situation at the ball, and enough other parts that I think it will rank as second best following Fire Rose. I'm still mostly reading this series because it's in stock at the library while I'm waiting for my requested books to arrive, but the darn author always gives me just enough hope that the next book will live up to its potential to keep me returning to her section in the shelves!

Pat F. says

Take one part Cinderella (with hints of Harriet Potter), one part All Quiet on the Western Front, one part Downton Abbey, and one part alchemy, and mix well.

This is the story of Eleanor (Ellie) Robinson, a girl who has been enslaved by her evil stepmother upon her father's death, and of Reggie Fenyx, a gentleman pilot who has become severely damaged from service in World War I. Reggie and Evil Stepmother are Masters of earth elements--air and earth, respectively--and Ellie is just starting to realize that she can control another (fire). The battle lines are drawn among these three as Stepmother tries to get Reggie to marry one of her hideous daughters while keeping Ellie enslaved. You can guess the ending, I'm sure.

The strengths of this book include strong, resourceful female characters (good and bad) who pass the Bechdel test and accurate portrayals of posttraumatic stress disorder (from domestic abuse and war). The weaknesses are that some of the characters lean toward caricatures (Locke, in particular), and the story is light--it really is Cinderella. I would like to see stories of the Elementals interacting with real-world evils:

criminals, war, bullies, corruption, etc. That would be something new, not a retread.

And, as others have pointed out, the copyediting was horrendous. I'm a professional editor, and I can usually "turn it off" while reading for pleasure. Not this one--omitted words, typos, misspellings, etc. Come on, Daw, spring for a real copyeditor.

Eero says

This is really bit changed version of the Cinderella.

Evil Step-mother is also evil witch too

Cinderella is also elemental mage

Prince is only noble, but he is also soldier and elemental mage, but he is injured in first world war and has also deep emotional scars from war.

And typical for this series Mercedes Lackey describes in great detail how people live in time period described in book. So this time we get to know how difficult life were in England during war and how losing millions of soldiering men changed society.

Blake says

It was fairly fun to read through but felt like a bit of a waste of time when I was finished.

She always picks out pretty obvious themes in her books and stresses them fairly strongly - this time round the stupidity of war and discrimination based on class and sex.

Some of it was interesting, but some of it was just over detail that bogged the story down. Can't say there was much closure or excitement at the end either, compared to how long the build up was.

All in all, not one of my favourite ML books.

Anna says

Growing up in a nerd household, I had often heard of Mercedes Lackey. She is, after all, one of the most prolific science fiction/ Fantasy authors out there. Phoenix and Ashes was the first book of hers I'd gotten around to reading, and I was overall content with it. Her characters, though magical, were grounded in the pain and sorrow of everyday life. They deal with the injustices of classism and sexism. They deal with the horrors of war.

It is a modernized telling of Cinderella, complete with wicked step sisters. Only the handsome prince is of a more moderate nobility, and happens to be a shell shocked veteran of World War I. The setting is rural England in the fictional town of Broom. As the classic tale unfolds, more and more of the town's men are conscripted to war. Those left are visibly maimed and emotionally scarred. Women, therefore, start to take on new roles, leading the heroine to realize that her dreams (not to marry the prince, but to go to Oxford), may come true. If only it weren't for those pesky spells entrapping her.

The book did break my general rule of Sci Fi: If it makes up more than 10 words, I'm out. But the characters persuaded me to stay. The over hyped magic and alchemy couldn't kill the interesting history and personal drives of each character.

One thing I couldn't forgive is the editing. I counted no less than 6 times I stumbled across typographical errors. Like running through a field of rocks, I tripped over every error. Adam and Even, us instead of use, words completely out of place, etc. It made me want to hurt the editor, who clearly got lazy and relied on spell check to get them through.

That combined with unnecessary repetition, made me feel as though Lackey, while creative, isn't that good a writer. Maybe she should slow down and focus on quality instead of quantity. Or at the very least fire her editor.

Giselle Bradley says

3.5 Stars. Okay, so I've figured out something about Lackey with this book. Her stories and how she weaves the fairytale elements into them are really good and make the experience great. But in the 3 books I've read in this series so far there has yet to be a flushed out romance. And these were all books with strong romance plots. I never believe the romance. Ever. It may be cute and I may believe that eventually these characters would fall in love but I have yet to believe that they are in love from what I've been given in the story.

There's never enough development put into the relationship. So even though the characters and the story may be excellent, the romance always brings down my overall enjoyment of it. Since such a huge part of the story feels completely unbelievable it's something that could never really win my love. But they're still really fun and good!

Dexter says

What's amazing is that not much actually happened throughout the whole thing. Over half of it was magical theory and Eleanor dreaming her way through Tarot cards. And yet, it was still brilliant.

I've never been a huge Cinderella fan, but this novel did a fabulous job retelling the original fairy tale, along with some history and magic. I really liked Eleanor and Reggie as well as the supporting cast, and Alison and company were very satisfying villains.

Perhaps my only real complaint was that the ending seemed a bit rushed. They finally won, and then there were just a few pages summing up what happened after. Considering the fact that SO much time was spent building up to everything, I would've liked a bit more time for it all to settle down as well.

Despite that, I really loved it all the way through. Highly recommend.

Nan says

This is one of my favorite books by Lackey. She's only a middling talented writer--at times, she can be brilliant, but other books are dreadful--and this is one of her better books. It's certainly got one of the best developed magic systems of any of her books.

Jess Hale says

An entertaining read with slight pacing problems.

I enjoy the books in the Elemental Masters series, fairytale retellings with elemental magic. This is a Cinderella story set during WWI.

I enjoyed the main characters and the potential for their romance. Both Ella and Reggie have problems and it's satisfying to see them overcome them. I thought there wasn't much development of their connection, though.

The villains were, in typical Lackey fashion, truly villainous. As with other books I could have done with slightly fewer pages devoted to the antagonist's slimy, gloating POV - it gets a bit repetitive. Yes, we get it - she's evil!

The main weakness in this book is the pacing - when Ella finds out about her magic we don't get a lot of the joy of her finding out about it, it's mainly in a conversation that happens "off screen". There's a slow bit in the middle of the book as Ella learns about magic with convoluted tarot symbolism. It wallows a bit: what Ella learns doesn't really affect the climax of the book, and as the Elemental Masters series can be read as largely standalone novels it's not laying foundations for future books in the series.

In addition, as a Cinderella story we know how the story is going to end - there will be a ball etc. After the long middle section, the ending comes quite quickly, and is sadly devoid of a satisfying confrontation between Ella and her evil stepmother. I liked the way Ella and Reggie work together (although I would have liked more of a conversation about their mutual magic etc. - I don't know if he ever understands what she's been going through), but their defeat of evil Allison was very quick. I wanted Ella to have a better victory!
