



The Guns Above

Robyn Bennis

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The nation of Garnia has been at war for as long as Auxiliary Lieutenant Josette Dupre can remember – this time against neighboring Vinzhalia. Garnia’s Air Signal Corp stands out as the favored martial child of the King. But though it’s co-ed, women on-board are only allowed “auxiliary” crew positions and are banned from combat. In extenuating circumstances, Josette saves her airship in the heat of battle. She is rewarded with the Mistral, becoming Garnia’s first female captain.

She wants the job – just not the political flak attached. On top of patrolling the front lines, she must also contend with a crew who doubts her expertise, a new airship that is an untested deathtrap, and the foppish aristocrat Lord Bernat – a gambler and shameless flirt with the military know-how of a thimble. He’s also been assigned to her ship to catalog her every moment of weakness and indecision. When the Vins make an unprecedented military move that could turn the tide of the war, can Josette deal with Bernat, rally her crew, and survive long enough to prove herself to the top brass?

The Guns Above Details

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From Reader Review The Guns Above for online ebook

Lata says

Reminiscent of the Horatio Hornblower stories, this book is loads of fun, with plenty of aerial combat and sarcastic banter between Josette Dupre, airship Lieutenant, and Lord Bernat, the aristocrat sent to her airship, by his General uncle, to monitor her and discredit her, and women in general, for the military brass. Josette is competent, which is infuriating for the brass, as her latest action helps turn the tide in a battle, giving her a promotion to Captain.

Saddled with Bernat and a new airship (with an untested and new design), she's told to patrol the front lines. Bernat spends much of his time talking to crew and writing a long and damning (and totally false) report about Josette's competence. Josette, meanwhile, also decides to put the new ship through its paces, and while on trial maneuvers, Dupre and her crew discover enemy movements toward Garnia. She decides to engage. We get lots of great descriptions of the battle in the sky, and insight into Josette's character.

Despite Bernat's missive to his uncle, his own thoughts about Josette, her crew, and airships, change over the course of the story, and an interesting friendship begins developing between the two individuals, with both having to radically reevaluate their earlier assumptions about the other. I am now looking forward to what Josette does next during the next phase of the war between Garnia and Vinzhalia.

wishforagiraffe says

I deeply enjoyed this book. A magic-less (or exceptionally low magic) secondary world full of airships and muskets and trains, still dealing with issues of imperialism and sexism is very much "my kind of thing" and the fast pace and well developed main characters made it even better.

It's a military fantasy without being overly gritty, but doesn't shy away from the realities of war, and it's a story about an unlikely friendship that we actually get to see unfold, rather than just hearing about how two fast friends are so unsuited for each other.

You could certainly read this for the fast paced aerial battles and witty, sarcastic banter, and I loved those aspects, but the underlying topics of sexism, family dynamics, the meaning of heroism and redemption, and imperialism all make it worth taking a bit more time with.

I'm definitely looking forward to the sequel, because while this book wraps up the episode fairly well, I'm not satisfied with the resolution of character motivations and development. Hence 4 stars out of 5.

Net Galley provided me a review copy in return for my honest review.

Scott Hitchcock says

A steampunk/military fantasy taking place in a WWI-esque setting.

This starts out really well. The first scene sets up a good potential plot with a natural gravitas. From there unfortunately it never takes off. Things become predictable, simplistic and cliche reading like fantasy 101.

There's also simply too much time spent on the structure of the ship and it becomes tedious. I understand the need to give the reader the sense of the dirigible since the mass of the story takes place in it but it needs to happen in the context of a developing story not at the expense of one.

The writer did have a very easy style and I would consider reading something by her in the future as her craft develops.

Bellamy says

I bought this book because I read the preview of the first few chapters in an article from when its release was coming, and I found the tone to be fun and pointed with a sense of humor very reminiscent of Terry Pratchet. If I was going to rate the first 7 or so chapters of the book, I would give it a four or a five!

Unfortunately, the further the book goes, the less it keeps with its initial tone and the more depressing and technical it gets.

A minor nitpick is that the airship descriptions and what was going on were too extensive and thorough to a degree that took away from the narrative. If I can be reading along and skip a full page of technical ship description every once in a while without it impacting the narrative at all, then that description is not really necessary to the book.

A more major nitpick is that this book sets itself up to be something completely different from what it ended up being. You are presented with a canny, hyper-competent, plucky female protagonist that has earned the respect of the men working under her despite the sexist expectations set against her. Soon enough, however, this book turns grim, and the foppish but socially canny man set to be the main character's foil and subvert her goals starts overstepping her personal boundaries and advising her because it turns out that she isn't as competent as you thought. The charming humor also dwindles to occasional spurts of tone-inappropriate jokes, and you are suddenly reading constant play by plays of aerial battles while the advertised female main character is punished for doing her job by the narrative and recurring oppressive sexism, and the tricky spoiled lord (who would have been a much more fascinating snake in the grass if he ever faced any consequences for it) is the only one to face more or less significant character development.

It can be a good book for some, though I maintain that it's really unnecessary to hammer on about how sexist your universe is if you're not actually planning on subverting that sexism in your narrative, but it's not at all the same book that you start out reading, nor that the summary (which highlights the characters, who don't end up developing very much) is about.

(edited after posting for grammar)

Akahayla says

When I started this book, I was really aggravated because I wanted to find some meaning to the whole thing, some purpose to the characters but halfway through the book I realized that in my "mission" to find some meaning, I was letting how awesome it was just fly over my head.

It's filled with so much action and humour that I was really sad when it ended because I'm going to really miss Bernat's banter and Josette's cold humour.

It felt like I was reading a pirates of the Caribbean movie except, the ship was flying and Captain Jack Sparrow was Bernat... who is not the captain but that's who he reminded me of.

I hope I get to read the next book in the series because I already miss Josette and the crew.

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

3.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum [https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/09/07/...](https://bibliosanctum.com/2017/09/07/)

The Guns Above is a book that has been on my radar for a while, and so when the audio edition became available I decided to take the plunge, doubly excited by the fact that it would be read by one of my favorite narrators, Kate Reading.

From the look of the book's cover, I had deduced that the story would be a military fantasy, though in truth it is a bit more complicated than that. For one thing, the presence of magic in this world is sparse to non-existent, not to mention that the tone and style of the setting more is more strongly reminiscent of something you'd find in the historical fiction adventure genre. And then of course we have the steampunk allusions with the airships and aerial battles, which certainly injects a fair amount of thrills and action.

As the novel opens, we are introduced to protagonist Josette Dupre, an airship captain in the Garnian Navy. While in general women are not frequently given command posts, her kingdom has been at war for the better part of life—most recently against the nation of Vinzhalia—and the military has need of all the warm bodies it can get. And thus, when Josette unexpectedly turns the tide in a major battle against the enemy while serving as an Auxiliary Lieutenant, she is rewarded with a promotion and an airship of a “revolutionary” design, a term which everyone in the navy dreads because it almost always means an experimental deathtrap. However, Josette is undaunted, taking to her new role as captain of the Mistral with aplomb even when the powers that be are making no secret their contemptuous dismay at having a female in such a highly placed position.

In particular, Josette's promotion has caught the attention of a general who is determined to see her fail and removed from the service. As it happens, his nephew, the pampered and foppish Lord Bernat is in need of some focus and discipline in his life, and so the young nobleman is summarily assigned to the Mistral to act as a spy for his uncle. Bernat's orders are to keep an eye on Josette, cataloguing all her flaws and mistakes for a negative report that will lead to her dismissal from the navy. However, as the airship crew heads into battle against the Vin, Bernat gets to witness Josette's leadership firsthand, and eventually comes to respect her abilities for strategy and command.

Let me first begin by saying I enjoyed The Guns Above. This book had all the tensions and urgency of one of my favorite genres, which is military sci-fi or space opera, except that the setting here more resembles the era of the Napoleonic Wars, of course. I always find myself caught up in the thrill of the moment whenever I'm treated to scenes of ship-to-ship assaults, reveling at the complete mayhem of hull breaches, blaring alarms, and panicked officers barking out orders. To my absolute joy, the airship assaults featured in this novel can certainly give any epic space battle a run for its money.

But for all the action in the story, I thought the character development was the best part of the book and would have liked to have seen more. Initially, I was perplexed as to why I wasn't enjoying myself as much as expected, until I realized how much of the plot was dominated by battle scenes and action sequences. Since at the time, my schedule was only allowing me to listen to this audiobook in short bursts, the constant barrage of pandemonium actually became a little tedious when in fact I was feeling in the mood for something more substantial. It wasn't until the later parts of the novel that I began to feel more invested in the story, and not surprisingly this was also when the friendship between Josette and Bernat finally evolved to the point where their interactions became more interesting. There was one particular bar scene that was my favorite, where the humor and camaraderie between the characters was on full display.

All told, I definitely enjoyed the second half of the novel more than the first, once story and character relationships were firmly established and began to evolve. At the very least, *The Guns Above* was fast-paced high-flying adventure full of explosive action and intrepid personalities. The audiobook was also a great listen because of the superb narration. As always, Kate Reading nailed the performance, her voice being the perfect match for Josette's poise and strength. This book is the best kind of escapism, especially if you're a fan of military fantasy or speculative fiction with a nice steampunk flavor. I'll be keeping my eye out for the second Signal Airship installment. Given all the groundwork completed here, I think the next one will be great.

Lisa says

Review from Tenacious Reader:<http://www.tenaciousreader.com/2017/1...>

3.5/5 Stars

Overall, *The Guns Above* was an enjoyable steampunk adventure, with a strong female protagonist and airships and battles.

Josette Dupre is an enjoyable protagonist who becomes the first female captain of an airship. Whether this assignment is out of earned respect or a setup to see her fail depends on perspective. Either way, it's an amazing opportunity that came her way after becoming a hero when her previous airship crashed. And it turns out her new airship is not just any airship, but a brand new, cutting edge model. Again, since it's cutting edge, the likelihood of demise is higher, so whether it was an honor or not is a bit debatable. But Josette is up for the challenge and handles everything with skill and humor. She really is a great character to follow as she lightens things with a great sense of humor and she kicks ass at what she does.

One of the things that didn't work well for me was the sexism. I know the author has done this on purpose, but the misogynistic characters in this just felt over the top. We get the view point from a an overly sexist character who's only real defining character trait was being a sexist. This made him essentially a caricature and not much more. Everything that came out of his mouth was negative about women, particularly about how unqualified they are for the military. I believe if it had been toned down it would have had more impact. I'm not saying there are not overtly sexist people in real life, but reading a perspective like that did little more than irritate me and the character felt flat. I found nothing redeemable about the character and just struggled a bit with listening to him and others be so dismissive and derogatory about women. I suspect some readers may actually enjoy seeing the protagonist overcome a character like this, but I just found it depressing and kind of irritating. Turns out I dislike reading sexist idiots in fiction as much as I hate listening to them in real life. There was just simply too much of that for me in this book. It is entirely

possible to get the point across about the level of sexism in the world without containing the amount of sexist verbal vomit that character spewed. This aspect of the book made me dock my rating half a star, so it was not a deal breaker, but did impact my rating a bit.

Anyway, outside of that, I really enjoyed the book. Overall, it has a decent pace and fun premise. If you can ignore the sexist idiots, or just laugh at them instead of getting irritated, then it's a great read. Even if you can't, despite my rant, I found more to enjoy than I did to rant about (my rant just took up more words in the review). This is a book that is about fun and adventure (and overcoming overt sexism) rather than shocking plot twists, so I wouldn't go into it expecting earth shattering surprises, but the journey and story are enjoyable.

Lindsay says

An action-packed military fantasy with airships being used as part of war at a level of technology roughly matching the Crimean or Napoleonic wars but set in an alternate world.

Auxiliary Lieutenant Josette Dupre (auxiliary because she's a woman), distinguishes herself in combat after taking over the command of her airship after her captain is killed and turning the tide of a critical battle. As her reward, she is promoted to Senior Lieutenant and given the command of an airship of "revolutionary new design" (read: flying deathtrap). But her performance and promotion has not left her without enemies, and a General that has it in for her assigns his nephew Lord Bernat as a spy to discredit her. When the shakedown flight of the *Mistral* uncovers a new advance on the part of the enemy Josette and Lord Bernat find themselves fighting battle after battle with an untried airship and crew.

I loved this. Military science fiction is often criticized for refighting the Napoleonic wars with spaceships, and this at least brings the action back to the correct timeframe. The fantastic elements are that it's set in an alternate world, and that the technology around airships has been brought back in time by about 50 years or so to coincide with muskets and cannons. There's no magic here.

Josette coming into her own as the Captain of the *Mistral* is fantastic to watch, as is the character journey of Bernat. The banter between the two and it's dry fatalistic humor is terrific as well. Bernat's ignorance of everything about airships works well as a way to introduce the reader to the technology and tactics as well, both of which are gone into in extraordinary detail.

A series not to be missed.

Marlene says

Originally published at Reading Reality

The *Guns Above* is an absolutely fantastic steampunk/Military SF action adventure story. This is one of those stories where it's science fiction mostly because it isn't anything else. The only SFnal element is the "not our world" setting and, of course, the airships. Those marvelous airships.

But in its protagonist of Lieutenant Josette Dupre, we have an avatar for every woman who has had it drummed into her head that “in order to be thought half as good as a man she’ll have to be twice as good. And that lucky for her, that’s not difficult.” And we’ve all heard it.

And on my rather confused other hand, it feels like Josette Dupre is Jack Aubrey, which makes Bernat Hinkal into Stephen Maturin. I’m having a really difficult time getting my head around that thought, but at the same time, I can’t dislodge that thought either.

Yes, I promise to explain. As well as I can, anyway.

Lieutenant Dupre technically begins the story as an Auxiliary Lieutenant, because women aren’t permitted to be “real” officers. Or give orders to men. Or participate in battles. Or a whole lot of other completely ridiculous and totally unrealistic rules and regulations that seem to be the first thing thrown over the side when an airship lifts.

Dupre is being feted as the winner of the Garnians’ recent battle in their perpetual war with the Vinzhaliens. A war which to this reader sounds an awful lot like the perpetual 18th and even 19th century wars between England and France. (Also the 14th and 15th centuries, better known as the Hundred Years’ War, because it was)

Who the war is with, and which side anyone is on, don’t feel particularly relevant, although I expect they will in the later books in this series that I am crossing my fingers for. What matters to the reader is that we are on Dupre’s side from beginning to end, against the Vinz, against the bureaucracy, against her commanding officer, against the entire world that is just so damn certain that she is incapable of doing the job she is manifestly so damn good at.

And we begin the book pretty much against Lord Bernat Hinkal, because his entire purpose on board Dupre’s ship Mistral is to write a damning report to his uncle the General, giving said General grounds for dismissing the first female captain in the Signal Corps. It doesn’t matter how much utter fabrication Bernat includes in his report, because whatever terrible things he makes up will be believed. There are plenty of reactionary idiots in the Army and the government who believe that women are incapable of commanding, therefore Dupre must be a fluke or a freak of nature or both.

The General is looking for ammunition to shoot down, not just Dupre, but the notion that the Garnians are losing their perpetual war, or at least running out of manpower to fight it, and that womanpower might possibly be at least part of the answer. But the General, like so much of the military hierarchy, is content to rest their laurels and their asses on the so-called fact that Garnia hasn’t lost a war in over three centuries, therefore they can’t be losing this one now.

The past is not always a good predictor of the future, especially when combined with the old truism that generals are always fighting the last war.

But what happens to Bernat, and to the reader, is that we follow in Dupre’s wake, observing her behavior, her doubts, her actions and her sheer ability to command not just her crew’s obedience but also its fear, its respect and even its awe. Dupre, whether in spite of or because of her so-called handicap of being female, is a commander that troops will follow into the toughest firefight – because she is their very best chance at getting to the other side alive – no matter how desperate the odds.

Dupre, her airship Mistral, and The Guns Above are all winners. The Garnian military hierarchy be damned.

Escape Rating A+: It's obvious that I loved *The Guns Above*. I got completely absorbed in it from the very first page, and was reluctant to put it down at the end and leave this world behind. Dupre is a marvelous hero who has clear doubts and fears and yet keeps on going from one great thing to another. Part of what makes her fantastic is that she hears that still small voice inside all of us that says we're faking it, but forces herself to keep going anyway. She exhibits that best kind of courage – she knows she's terrified, but she goes ahead anyway. Because it's her duty. Because she knows that, in spite of everything, she is the best person available for the job. Not that she's the best person in the universe for it, she has way too much self-doubt for that, but that in that place and in that time she's the best person available. And to quote one of my favorite characters from a much different universe, "Someone else might get it wrong."

The way that this world is set up, and the way that the setting up proceeds, reminds me tremendously of the Aubrey/Maturin series by the late Patrick O'Brian. That series features a British naval officer during the Napoleonic Wars, along with the friend that he brings aboard his first (and subsequent) command. Like Dupre, Jack Aubrey is also a lieutenant in his first outing, called "Captain" by courtesy when aboard his rather small ship. As is Dupre. Also like the Aubrey series, there is a tremendous amount of detail about the ship and the way it is rigged and the way that the crew behaves. The reader is virtually dumped into a sea of lines and jargon, and it makes the setting feel real. In the O'Brian series it was real, and here it isn't, but the feeling is the same, that this is a working ship and that this is the way it works.

Also the focus here, like in the O'Brian series, is on this battle and this action and this fight, not on the greater politics as a whole, most of the time. It feels like the Granians are England in this scenario, and the Vinzhaliens, France. This is not dissimilar to the Honor Harrington series, where Honor is Jack, Manticore is England, and Haven is France. "This has all happened before, and it will all happen again."

Dupre is only a resident of the halls of power when she is about to receive a dressing down, as is Jack Aubrey in the early days.

But the comparison of Aubrey to Dupre makes Bernat into Maturin, and it actually does work a bit. But where Maturin was a doctor and discovered a function aboard the ship early on, Bernat is rather different. He's a spy for his uncle, and Dupre knows it. He also begins the journey as a completely useless supernumerary whose only task seems to be to foment small rebellions. Also he's a complete fop and as out of place on a ship of war as fox in a henhouse. Until he gets every bit as caught up in the action as the reader.

The fascinating thing about Bernat is that he neither changes nor reforms. And yet he does. At the beginning of the story he's a complete fop, more concerned about his dress, his drink and the quality of his food than he is about anything else, including the progress of the war. He believes what he has been taught. At the end of the story, he is still a fop. But his eyes and his mind have been opened. Partially by Dupre, and partially by the rest of the crew. And, it seems, partially by finding something that he is good at. Aboard the Mistral, he has a positive purpose. On land, only a negative one. And it changes his perspective while not changing his essential nature.

At least not yet. Finding out where he goes from here, along with what plan to be the wild gyrations of Dupre's career, looks like it's going to be fascinating. And I can't wait.

The Guns Above has received my first A+ Review for 2017, and will definitely be on my "Best of 2017" list, along with my Hugo nominations next year. This book is absolutely awesomesauce.

Roy says

Pretty solid military fantasy with muskets canons and airships. After a strong start it begins to enter familiar fantasy territory and the tropes seen in traditional fantasy tales are seen. Good fun fluff fantasy that has an easy breezy writing style that flows very well.

Audrey says

This is a pretty typical steampunk story in my experience so far. The dialogue is fun; sort of a subdued Terry Pratchett style.

“Well, I expect you’ll manage,” the general said. “The ship’s Mistral. It’s a new design.”

Josette’s enthusiasm was momentarily checked, for the general had said the two words every airman dreaded: “new design.” Army flight engineers were forever searching for new and more efficient ways to get airmen killed. When they’d collected enough of them, they put them together in a devious package called a “new design.” But she took heart. At least he hadn’t said “revolutionary new design.”

After a sip of tea, the general went on. “My advisors tell me that it’s quite revolutionary.”

But most of the book is about battles. They’re good battles and well written. I just tend to zone out during fight scenes and battles in both books and TV. It’s just me. I think it’s because they usually lack dialogue and don’t advance the plot very quickly. (I find Brandon Sanderson’s action scenes engaging and brilliant.)

The characters are all fun, although the moronic general is very annoying. (He’s supposed to be.) He reminds me of General Melchett:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rblfK...>

Bernie really grew on me, and Josette is my daughter’s middle name.

There’s no romance (YAY!!) but may be in later books. This one had an unrequited crush and an enemies-to-friends arc for the MCs. The editing was really good in some parts and really sloppy in others. I kept stumbling over misplaced commas, which completely interrupted the flow of the narrative.

There’s some rare strong language; no sexual content or graphic violence.

Jessie (Ageless Pages Reviews) says

This book begins and ends with a literal bang. It’s beyond fun. It’s... sorrycanthelpit... explosively entertaining. It’s a fast fantasy and steampunk read that feels like a historical fiction adventure a la *Master and Commander* but less stuffy and with more aerial battles. Napoleonic-era type warfare dominates the plot, but the entire book is centered on Garnia’s first female airship captain. Very fast and very fun.

Sherwood Smith says

Josette Dupre has managed to become a captain of an airship, though women are not supposed to be in command positions. When she takes off in the airship Mistral, she has a spy aboard, the finicky dandy Lord Bernat, nephew of the general in command of the war effort.

Bernat is determined to discredit Josette, and thus gain a reward from his uncle, money he can use as *menus plaisirs* to get back to his life of lace and fine wine and compliant older ladies. Josette would love to scare the fop right off her airship.

They begin a trial run, testing untested elements in the airship . . . and because Josette is Josette, they run straight into action, and more action, and yet more--getting caught at the edge of a major invasion.

The narrative voice is brisk, often hilarious, studded with the typical black humor of soldiers in action. It's a funny book, the humor carried mainly by the narrative voice, because the book is also unflinchingly violent. Josette reminds me of Horatio Nelson, whose main strategy could be summed up as "Full speed ahead!" Collateral damage was expected by all, especially in a world wherein airships crashed more often than not.

The banter between Josette and Bernat is one of the book's main delights, the action scenes vivid and tense. The meticulous description of the airship makes me believe I'm going to be seeing one fly overhead today. Bennis has also developed believable tactics for airship fighting, providing air support for rifle and musket ground troops, and ground-to-air fighting.

The relationship is not resolved, and big questions are raised near the end. While this book comes to a satisfactory close, there are so many tantalizing threads that I really hope Bennis is planning a series.

Copy provided courtesy NetGalley

Karina Read says

This was an enjoyable read but there was perhaps a little too much battle over character development/exploration. That's a personal gripe as I love good characters over fast paced plotting, although there was little plot here other than battle after battle after long winded descriptions of airships after battle after battle (you get my gist).

I enjoyed it enough to finish it, and i may read the second one after I read the blurb. But the overly descriptive narrative concerning the ships became tiresome early on and not even Bernie's excellent quips could overcome that annoyance.

Jaclyn says

The Guns Above is the start of a new series set in a steampunk type world. Josette Dupris has been part of the Air Signal Corp for years; however, as a woman she's never been able to move past a certain rank, and

women are certainly never supposed to be involved in a battle. While Josette is no stranger to war, she never expected that she would be given a command of her own, which is exactly what happens in *The Guns Above*. Due to the Josette's actions and the visibility of said heroics in the press, she is given command of an airship. Unsurprisingly Josette doesn't have a lot of support in a military that doesn't respect it's women. The General decides to send his dandified nephew Lord Bernat to shadow Josette and report back on every thing that doesn't go right for her. At first, this is an easy things for Bernat to do. He doesn't like or respect Josette and has some pretty preconceived notions about women in the service. Of course, war gets in the way and changes Bernat's opinions.

I really, really liked the premise for *The Guns Above*. Lady steamship captain battling it out against the odds? Um, yes please. That being said, I really would have liked to have seen more character development. If you're a fan of intricate descriptions of steamships and a play-by-play account of a battle, then this book is for you. While I have enjoyed some military fantasy books, I need a lot of character development to keep me interested in the story. And because I felt that there was so much potential for Josette as well as Bernat, I was kind of disappointed that there wasn't much meat to either character. Tidbits were dropped, but the focus of the book was on the battles and that's just not where my interest lies. That being said, this is the start of a series and with that I think that readers will see more character development over the next few books (although that's not as quickly as I would like to see it!).

The Guns Above is an interesting start to a new series. The setup is intriguing, but there is something missing if you like in-depth character development.

*Review copy provided by the publisher via NetGalley.
