



# Firethorn

*Sarah Micklem*

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## **Firethorn** Sarah Micklem

Before she was Firethorn, she was Luck, named for her red hair, favored by the goddess of Chance. A lowborn orphan, Luck is destined to a life of servitude. But when her mistress dies, Luck flees to the forest. There she discovers the sacred firethorn tree, whose berries bring her fevered dreams, a new name—and curious talents. Transformed, she emerges from her exile a young woman with powers beyond her ken.

Firethorn has changed, but her world has not...until one chance encounter alters her destiny forever. In the chaos of the UpsideDown Days, when the highborn and the low trade places, Firethorn couples with Sire Galan, a highborn warrior. Emboldened by desire and her own restlessness, she follows fate and Galan to camp with the king's army. But their unspoken love has no place in a brutal world ruled by caste and violence, and a dark future threatens from the shadows. Living among soldiers, concubines, and wastrels, and faced with a series of tormenting challenges, Firethorn will have to rely on the enigmatic gifts Fate grants her to survive—body and soul.

## **Firethorn Details**

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Author : Sarah Micklem

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# From Reader Review Firethorn for online ebook

## Mike (the Paladin) says

I got this based on a recommendation. It opens on well plowed earth we have seen in other stories. That in itself is not a problem, it would probably be impossible to come up with a totally new "story" now. All story lines by now are in some way retellings of older "proto-stories" so to speak.

As I got into this one however I found I just couldn't get into it. Worse i couldn't get involved with the protagonist, i just didn't care about her.

Then, worse the story got annoying. The protagonist started to annoy me. Things that haven't bothered me in other stories bothered me here. For example she ran into the woods with only 2 belongings..the dress she wore and an "outer garment". It seemed sometimes to be a coat and sometimes a cloak... I also assume she was wearing some form of "small clothes or under garment that she didn't bother to count. I assume like many in the middle ages she was sort of "stitched" into her clothes and wore them till they fell off, with only "necessary" openings being present. I don't know, maybe not, maybe she just sat naked in the woods as they dried when she'd washed them. She did go on about being cold in winter???

Anyway you see my dilemma, in most stories I'd never notice this kind of thing. I tried to give this book a fair shot, but I just couldn't get involved with the main character...so I put it down and gave it a single star. I know some of you like it...I'm happy for you. I didn't

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## Kelly says

A young drudge, Luck, flees into the Kingswood when her kindly mistress dies, leaving her to a cruel master. After what can best be described as a shamanic near-death experience, Luck believes she has been chosen by Ardor, the god of fire, for some unknown purpose, and changes her name to Firethorn.

Firethorn returns to civilization, where she becomes the lover of Sire Galan, a handsome, reckless young knight on his way to the king's war. Infatuated with him, and having no better options, Firethorn follows Galan to the Marchfield, where the army is assembling. The rest of *Firethorn* takes place at the Marchfield, and the main plotline concerns a feud between Sire Galan's clan and another noble house. As Galan's mistress, Firethorn is often near the center of the rivalries and hostilities that develop.

*Firethorn* is an unusual fantasy. There's no grand quest forming the backbone of the story, and the much-talked-about war is just getting underway as the novel ends. Sarah Micklem zooms in, instead, on day-to-day life in the army camp and how it changes Firethorn. This is a harsh and gritty world, particularly hard on women. Firethorn's wits, sharp tongue, and herbal skills sometimes enable her to help herself and others, and sometimes get her into deep trouble.

Another focus of *Firethorn* is the relationship between Firethorn and Galan. By modern standards, this relationship is dysfunctional in the extreme. However, I thought it was realistic, given the setting. This is a society in which love is disdained, and love between a knight and a commoner unthinkable, so when Firethorn and Galan begin to realize their feelings are developing beyond lust, they are unprepared to deal

with these emotions. Misunderstandings, jealousy, and fights ensue.

An underlying theme is honor, and the differences between true honor and the way honor is often measured in a violent, sexist society. In the Marchfield, men's honor is a matter of duels and vendettas, women's honor is too tied to chastity, and "mudmen" (commoners) are believed to have no honor at all. Firethorn is struggling to do the right thing in a situation where doing the right thing often leads to punishment rather than recognition. It's an interesting exploration of the theme. Micklem casts a critical eye on ideas that go unquestioned in some fantasies.

If there's any flaw in *Firethorn*, it's that it sometimes seems like one bad thing after another, with few triumphs and no comic relief. The relentless grittiness sometimes made it hard for me to read more than a little at a time. I'm glad I persevered. Micklem's prose is beautiful, I loved watching Firethorn buck the system, and even though I started out hating Galan with a passion, the love story had some moments that surprised me with their emotional power. Many questions are left unanswered at book's end, and I look forward to seeing what lies ahead for Firethorn.

I'll end this review with a quote that displays both Micklem's prose and her treatment of war:

*"When I'd decided to go with Galan, I'd been ignorant of war. It had been no more to me than tales told about the king's doings, songs about battles so ancient that those who survived them had long since died of old age, tapestries with woven blood spurting from woven wounds. But my ignorance proved to be willful, for surely it was all there in the tales, the songs, the tapestries, if I'd chosen to look: the cruelty under all that splendor. But the songs and stories lied when they gave war shape and purpose. Would I have believed the wanton waste of battle, the squandering of life and suffering, if I'd not seen it myself? And the waste of meaning, for Hazard stalked the field, choosing one to be killed and another maimed and another to go unscathed, and not for anything a man had done or failed to do. Fate gives us what we've earned, but it was Chance who held sway, careless and sightless Chance."*

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## **Ruby Slippers ? says**

At first I really did enjoy reading this book. I didn't mind the slow sort of meandering that this novel did while telling the story of Luck and her transformation into Firethorn. I liked the details and the world building. I even liked Firethorn, and maybe I still do to some extent. The rest of the story is much like the beginning, slow and meandering, and there in lies the problem. I don't mind slow starts as long as the tension and action start to build but it doesn't in the story. It's really a book about the day to day grind of Firethorn's life as an object of luck and a thing to fuck for Galan. It's not so much that nothing happens but that nothing *exciting* happens.

The romance was not something I enjoyed either. I have no idea why Firethorn loves Galan so much, and I find it hard to believe that Galan loves her at all. It's a romance full of sexism that seems to be accepted for the sake of "historical accuracy" and for some that maybe enough of a justification, but it's not for me.

The characters are well written and had a certain depth to them, but none were able to grab me and make me care for them. Firethorn's actions did not endear her to me in later parts of the novel. It's safe to say I cared nothing for Galan whatsoever.

It just wasn't an entertaining book and didn't have any characters that made me feel anything for them other

than frustration.

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## **Felicia says**

Very interesting book. Realistic and compelling, not a romance novel per say, although there is stuff in there. There is a very compelling world built here, gritty and realistic but from a female perspective and novelist. Abercrombiesque mixed with Charles De Lint, felt like the author really studied history to make the world feel dirty, gripping and real. I enjoyed it, although the characters were slightly hard to connect to. The lead feels a bit loony sometimes. Very interesting thought!

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## **Clay Kallam says**

Sarah Micklem's 'Firethorn' (Bantam Spectra, \$14, 383 pages) is a bit of a puzzler.

It is packaged like a fantasy, and begins that way. A young girl in a medieval society runs off to the forest, eats some mysterious berries and is given some minor powers. She returns to her village, and has a fling with a noble, and impulsively follows him off to war.

At this point, I thought Firethorn (for that's her name) might wind up getting dumped by the nobleman (Sire Galan) and then go off to explore the rest of the world that Micklem has so meticulously created -- but that doesn't happen. In fact, 'Firethorn', it quickly becomes clear, is basically a love story between Firethorn and Sire Galan, and the various difficulties their love presents, both to themselves and their society.

At that point, the necessity for any fantasy elements at all completely disappear. The book could have just as easily been set in 14th century England, and the same issues (of honor and caste and vengeance and violence) could have been addressed. So in the end, 'Firethorn' isn't really a fantasy novel at all, but a medieval love story that's set on another planet for no particular reason.

All that said, I liked 'Firethorn,' even though I'm not a major of fan of straight love stories. Firethorn is an interesting character, and Sire Galan is far from the stock romantic hero one would expect from a romance novel. There's also a lot of blood and guts at book's end, which has also been crafted to leave plenty of room for a sequel (or sequels). And straight love story or not, I look forward to volume two.

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## **Sara Thompson says**

I picked this book off the shelf at the library because it was next to the space where the book I was looking for should have been. I took it home because I liked the cover. Yes, I judge books by their covers. If a publisher's marketing department can spend all that money trying to put something on the cover to appeal to certain people, who am I to let it go to waste?

The story, in a nutshell, centers around Firethorn, a common woman who goes to war with a soldier as his mistress where she is subjected to ill treatment by other soldiers and assorted nobles on the way. True to her name, she has a fiery temper. But she's also good with herbs.

I liked the herblore in the book, clearly it was researched. Or maybe not.

My chief complaint with this book was the lack of rise and fall in action. If this book had a heart beat, it would be a flat line. I wanted more tension around events in the book - the fire, some of the battle scenes.

The world seemed incomplete to me. Or perhaps I couldn't get my mind around the mishmash of too many other worlds. I'm not a huge fantasy fan, but this seemed to draw on too many genres including medieval, ancient Greek myth, romance, and fantasy. For instance, I was confused by the scene in the Kingswood...is this a world where magic exists and is employed? Or not?

Threads of plot were teased out then dropped only to be picked up for a sentence later.

So it's a trilogy right? Which is good, because the setting is a preparation station before going to war. A lot happens, but they don't actually get to war.

Maybe the author has learned more about writing and will take the response from this book and pour it into the next.

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## **Krystal says**

I picked up this book during a whirlwind shopping trip in B&N – grabbed it because the name sounded interesting, the cover wasn't horrible, and the reviews I found with a quick search on my phone said it wasn't too terrible a book. So I bought it. Well, I guess it wasn't too terrible.

It also wasn't too exciting. Didn't really suck me in, didn't really have me too invested in the characters or the story. All in all, meh. There were bits of the novel's world that were a little interesting – their gods, their society structure, etc ... all sort of glossed over, not really explained in depth, sort of forcing us to assume much, glean what we could from the tidbits that are given. I will say this, I was intrigued by the fact that one of their gods had two avatars – the Sun and the Moon. Common, yes. But in this story, the Sun was the female avatar, and the Moon, the male. Now, most every fantasy novel I've read generally associates the Moon with the feminine. Shy, coy, mysterious, etc. And it fits. And I'm used to that. So to hear the Sun described in this world as She, blinding the world with her glittering veils ... it was interesting. A little backward in my opinion, but I guess it works.

The story itself: A girl named Luck wanders into the woods after her Dame (her sort of "master") dies. She lives out there, in like a cave or whatever, for about a year. Eats some firethorn berries, they give her visions of the god Ardor, she decides it's time to return to civilization. (fun side note: firethorn – also called Pyracantha, in the real world – not poisonous or hallucinogenic or anything. Just nasty tasting.) So now Luck, renaming herself Firethorn, is back in her village. During a local festival, a day when the common folk are served by the ruling class, Firethorn couples with a man of the Blood (ruling class) and they both sort of become besotted. Her mainly because ... well, I don't know. He was cute? of the Blood? she had no better options? And him because he sees her as being sent to him by one of the gods for luck, basically a rabbit's foot that puts out. He's certain that if he brings her with him when he goes to war (which all the Blood are gathering to do) that he'll survive. That's right folks, it's true love from the start.

The rest of the book takes place in the Marchfield, the plot of land where all the clans of the Blood gather to prepare for the war. And by “prepare for the war,” I mean sit around, play at mock tourneys, and basically just get into the sort of trouble that happens when lots of amped-up men get together and are then told to sit and wait. During all the crap that naturally comes from this sort of situation, the romance between Firethorn and her man, Galan, blooms. Blooms like the mandrake root charm she binds with Galan’s hair and buries under the full moon. Yeah, to bind him to her. Because having the man truly love her, not good enough.

Galan’s character is probably quite accurate for a man of that time and setting, but he doesn’t make for that likable of a love interest. And Firethorn isn’t that great either. These two are definitely bound together, whether by affection, mutual need (for security, ownership, whatever), or by the binding charm Firethorn makes ... but there’s not much in the book about any sort of true affection. They both exhibit a bit here and there, but it’s not extremely believable and you can never be entirely certain about the reason for said affection.

The writing was a bit tedious at times; I often found myself quickly skimming through long paragraphs of descriptions that I really didn’t care about. Even inner monologues got long and tiresome, as none of these characters ever really evolve. They basically just wax on and on about the same things through the whole book. So yeah, can’t say with all honesty that I read every word of this book. But I don’t think I missed much of importance.

The ending leaves you with a cliffhanger – Galan gives Firethorn a chunk of land and his hunting lodge/castle as her own, sending her away from the war they’re about to embark on, wanting her kept safe. Firethorn is torn between leaving him (\*gasp\* how could she ever be parted from him? the pain, too much to bear ... this is me rolling me eyes) or defying his wishes and following him into war, without his knowledge. The book doesn’t exactly make it clear that she doesn’t make a decision to stay or go, but it definitely doesn’t make it clear that she’s doing one or the other. It’s pretty vague and annoying, actually. Now, this is the first in a trilogy (the second book – Wildfire – is out, but I don’t believe the third is yet) so I understand leaving the readers hanging. But still. The book wraps up with Firethorn worrying over her options, pondering Galan and her binding of him to her, and then it sort of trails off. After reading the synopsis of Wildfire, not sure if I really want to read it. I wanted to before, because I wanted to know if Firethorn was going to war or if she was going to the castle. But the synopsis I read of the second book told me right out that \*SPOILER\* she follows him to war. Well, alrighty, that’s all I wanted to know.

Now, I don’t really want to read a book about some bedservant and her man in the middle of some war. Something tells me that this author’s writing of the war would just be unbearable. I don’t even really enjoy war stories when the author’s writing is exciting and interesting. I would much rather have read a story about Firethorn, with her greenwoman skills, charms and various minor supernatural gifts from the gods ... I’d like to read about her going to this castle, in a land she’s never been, a slightly higher station than before – not quite a kept concubine, but not a “sheath” (for his “sword,” get it ... clever), and she’d be all alone. (Possibly with a small staff there at the castle? Would she be now sort of in charge? That would be an interesting situation for her character. A lowborn commoner now faced with ruling over those not much lower than her in station. Interesting dynamics there.) And living nearby would be Galan’s wife (yes, of course he has one) and I’d love to read some interaction between those two. I want to see Firethorn in that world, getting to know herself without Galan, learning about her skills and gifts, growing into a stronger woman. Then Galan can return from war a little humbled and a little wiser from his experiences, and they would both be better people, whole people, and they could have a real romance.

Yes, that’s a story I’d like to read. I know I’m taking my modern ideas of strong women and my love for slightly unrealistic romance/true love/passion and putting it into a medieval setting, where it probably

wouldn't have occurred in real life, but who cares. fan-ta-sy

But unfortunately, the story I want isn't the story that's continued in the series. And so, I probably won't continue reading the series. If I wanted to read a similar tale only much much better – I'd read the Kushiel series by Jacqueline Carey.

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### **Katie M. says**

In the parallel universe where our evil selves have goatees, *Firethorn* would be a romance novel. In this one, it's something darker and much more interesting. Some of the elements of a romance novel are present: an improbably handsome knight chooses a common woman as his bedmate and sweeps her away from her life of servitude, and she accompanies him as he rides off to serve in the King's army. Their passion, both physical and emotional, is intense, and sometimes it's not really clear why these two are drawn to each other besides the fact that they're very attractive and the protagonists.

However, *Firethorn* refuses to sentimentalize the romance between people of different classes or to sugarcoat the invented medieval-ish culture. Firethorn, the narrator, seethes with anger at her treatment under the hands of the nobility—often including her lover, Sire Galan—and men in general. I spent much of the novel trying to decide whether to actually root for Firethorn and Galan's romance or whether the innate power dynamics tainted it beyond repair. The novel examines the ways that violence, class oppression, and sexism interact and reinforce each other. If that sounds grim and dull, rest assured that the novel is also gripping and beautifully written, and know that the protagonist is a woman with many strengths and believable flaws. She uses her herbalism knowledge, intelligence, relationships (with Galan and friendships with other women), and most of all her spirit to survive in a world that seems set against it. (Occasionally it does feel like one awful thing after another, but as long as you're not expecting fluff it's not out of hand.) There's surprisingly little magic for a novel classified as fantasy, but tons of fascinating world-building. Apparently the sequel came out recently; I am definitely going to seek it out.

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### **Yuki Shimmyo says**

3.75 stars. This book is beautifully written -- I could imagine the sentences being woven by someone with graceful and nimble fingers. I was immediately drawn into this medieval-ish world in which the fantasy element is more mystical and mythical than "magical" and kept to a minimum for the majority of the book -- the back cover description of Luck's transformation into Firethorn is a bit misleading and occurs very early in the story.

I appreciated the unsentimental and realistic look at the very precarious position of an orphaned young girl in a harsh realm and period. The 15/16 year-old heroine Luck/Firethorn who must survive by her wits and knowledge of herb lore and other talents is a familiar character, like Ayla of Jean Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear* and perhaps Alyce of Karen Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice*. There's a fair bit of sex and violence, and very detailed battle scenes if you're into that sort of thing.

As a city-dweller with a green thumb, I enjoyed all the foraging scenes, and details of trees and plants and their uses as medicine and poison. This seems to turn off some readers.

My one beef with this book is that it feels like Part I of a novel and does not truly stand alone. It's a problem I have with other recent and popular "trilogies."

Here's a sample of writing that stuck in my mind because it is Firethorn's first time traveling past the woods of the only world she knows:

*The road dipped and rose, and we came over the last hill and saw the army encamped over a full league of rolling plain. Beyond the army, the sea. I had imagined the sea would be like a great lake in a bowl of mountains, water cupped by land, but it spilled past the horizon. There was no edge to it, sea dissolved into sky and sky into sea in a gray haze. The surface of the water, green and pocked, reflected the low clouds like an old bronze mirror dulled by verdigris. It was marked by whitecaps quickly scrawled and quickly erased, leaving nothing for the eye to fasten on, a scene absurdly flat and featureless. Yet my eye was caught by it. I looked past the Marchfield until we were down the hill and riding through a city of sumptuous pavilions and squalid hovels, so swarming with men and horses--and sheep, chickens, boys, dogs, goats, women, and mules--that I was bewildered.*

I had a good laugh seeing women mentioned between goats and mules! But it really makes you think about the station and worth of the life of a lowly "mudwoman" in such times.

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## **Wealththeow says**

I am wildly in love with this book. It is told through the eyes of Firethorn, a foundling mudchild who grows up under the kind but stern tutelage of a Dame of the Blood. Firethorn learns herblore and pride from the Dame, but after her mistress's death she is adrift. Too proud and grief-stricken to serve under the Dame's nephew (who rapes her, btw--this is not a cozy book), she runs away to the Kingswood. She lives there for a year, nearly starving poisoning herself on berries in the meantime. Finally, she crawls back to the mudpeople's village.

A chance meeting with Sire Galen, a bold and handsome knight passing through, leads her to link her fortunes to his. She follows him to war. Their passion for each other is in constant battle with their prideful natures and the vast gulf between their stations.

Micklem has written a remarkable book. It is not a romance, although love and lust play powerful roles in the plot and Firethorn's motivations. It is not accurate medieval history, although Micklem's detailed and nuanced world seems an alternate to our own. It is not even fantasy, because it is never clear if Firethorn's herbal remedies and incantations are magic, science, or coincidence. It is an often brutal, sometimes sweet, tale of a young woman surviving in a society that holds her unclean and unworthy. The battles, tourneys and love scenes are intense, but no more so than the roiling inner life of the main character. I could barely take my eyes off the pages, and in fact I ended up being half an hour late to work today because I needed to finish it.

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## **Kirstin says**

All the interesting plot was bypassed and overshadowed by the obsession with sex. Just when it would start getting interesting, it would go right back to whether our heroine was getting laid and if her beau was laying someone else. \*sigh\* I. Don't. Care.

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## Ben Babcock says

I went to the library last week for the first time in too long. I got 14 books, most of them added to my to-read list in 2009. I love that Goodreads lets me never forget *which* books I want to read, but sometimes I still forget the *why*. Such is the case here.

*Firethorn* begins with 28 pages of the protagonist alone in a forest for a year. She eventually eats some berries from the firethorn tree, passes out from hunger, decides when she wakes up that her new name is Firethorn and it's time to go back and live among people in a village. It was a long, dialogue-lacking first chapter, and I was bored out of my mind. This summarizes two of my major complaints about the book: the chapters are too long, and we spend too much time in the narrator's head and not enough interacting with other characters.

Chapters are, for me, session markers. I try not to interrupt my reading unless I hit a chapter break (getting tea before it has oversteeped is probably a notable exception). Chapters that are too short can be annoying, but overly long chapters are just evil: there's nothing worse than slogging through a book one isn't enjoying and flipping forward only to find there are twenty more pages until the next chapter. Unfortunately, the massive chapters in this book are more of a symptom of its glacial pacing—more on that in a moment.

Firethorn is a nice enough person. She cares for people and uses her knowledge of herbs to help them. However, the interface that Sarah Micklem provides between the reader and Firethorn is cumbersome. It's laden with a lot of archaic terms, such as *cataphract* and *armiger*, and a conflation between the names of gods and the houses that claim to be descended from those gods. (That is, there is a god named Arbor and a house/clan named Arbor, and sometimes when Firethorn ascribes an action to "Arbor", it is difficult from the context to know to which Arbor she refers.)

Micklem borrows a lot from British history (and British slang) but never delves into the details behind her faux medieval world in any satisfactory way. I suppose one might try to justify this by saying that this is how Firethorn would understand what's going on; peasants don't really grasp the intricacies of the conflicts between nobility. If we accept the premise that this book is an attempt to show us a "woman's perspective" of life in a camp as soldiers march to war, then perhaps this is a satisfactory explanation. However, I'm not so sure peasants would be that ignorant. With no TV and the population functionally illiterate, it seems like they would have the time and the memory to parse out all those details.

I wish I could follow *Booklist* is praising *Firethorn* as "a great piece of gritty, feminist fiction". But it's not all that gritty. Grim and sometimes brutal in its portrayal of men's attitudes towards women like Firethorn? Yes. Yet in my opinion, *grittiness* has an element of language to it—an element that Micklem conceals beneath layers of slang terms for genitalia and prose that is overly formal to the point of being stilted. It's difficult to feel connected to Firethorn or any of the other characters, because I feel like I'm reading the book through a very thick fog.

I'll tiptoe around whether this work is "feminist" and instead look at the related question of how well it presents a woman's view of marching to war. Obviously I am ill-suited to such a discussion, being neither a woman nor a medieval peasant going to war. In many respects, Micklem captures the sense of tension that must exist for someone in Firethorn's position: she is at the mercy of her patron, this Sire Galan, particularly when it comes to whose bed she shares. Our society is very enlightened by comparison and women still face

a number of challenges to their autonomy and self-determination. So in this sense, *Firethorn* deserves its praise.

But what a long journey it is to reach such a conclusion!

*Firethorn*'s downfall as a book is that **nothing happens**. It is most definitely not "a sweeping adventure saga as mystical as it is raw", *Publishers Weekly*. Sweeping adventure sagas require adventures to be had on a sweeping scale. While I understand that this is a character-driven novel and the events are all about *Firethorn*'s experiences, I wouldn't describe them as "sweeping". As for "raw", refer above to my discussion of grittiness in relation to language.

I spent a great deal of time lightly skimming, because **most of this book feels like filler**. It could be slimmed considerably and would probably pack a greater punch as a result. As it is, I had a very difficult time with this book: every time it betrayed a glimmer of promise, *Firethorn* strangles it to death with purple prose and poor pacing. She's a nice person but a poor narrator. *Firethorn* shows all the signs of sincere effort, but it doesn't deliver the excitement that needs to accompany its emotional depth. *Firethorn might* be feminist ... but it's also boring ... and when it comes to reading, the latter trumps any other consideration, every time.

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## Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

I was initially attracted by this book's gorgeous cover, then turned off by the bookjacket description, which makes this sound like another standard boring fantasy. It's not. The *Firethorn* books fill in a gaping hole in the "gritty fantasy" subgenre: they tell the story of women and commoners in a medieval-esque society.

As other reviewers have recounted, this book follows the title character, *Firethorn*, as she leaves her village to follow a passing "cataphract" (knight) to war, serving as his mistress. Most of the book takes place at the army camp, but it's anything but dull, with *Firethorn* navigating the treacherous currents of power, lust and revenge that sweep the camp. I was hugely impressed with this book: it doesn't shy away from the harsh realities (like many a gritty fantasy, it contains its share of mud, blood and filth), and it shows an interest in the lives of women that is refreshing in this genre. The book is utterly realistic, but that doesn't make it depressing: there's a bit of romance here, for instance, unidealized as it may be.

And Micklem doesn't get enough credit for her worldbuilding. It's been awhile since I've seen such an original and fully realized culture portrayed in fantasy. Apparently the author has studied anthropology, and it shows. This isn't just another attempt at portraying medieval Europe with a different religion; anybody who appreciates great worldbuilding in fantasy should like this book. I'm especially pleased with Micklem's portrayal of this world as it would actually be, rather than in an idealized fashion, and the way she keeps magic to a minimum, on the fringes of society. You won't see any sorcerers wielding lightning bolts in this one. Instead, you'll get an extremely well-written book: I didn't fully appreciate the depth and originality of Micklem's writing until the second time through, but neither genre nor more literary-minded readers should be disappointed.

*Firethorn* herself is a tad too idealized for my taste, and her saintly behavior toward her enemies became especially annoying (I was pleased to see her become a more morally ambiguous character in the second volume). I found the development of the supporting characters to be good, although as the book is written in

first person, we get to know them only as well as Firethorn herself does; there are no revealing monologues here, and little trust or affection between many of the characters. The quality of Micklem's prose is excellent, but while something is always happening, the pace lags a bit at times. I could have used less talk about herbal remedies--unfortunately, one of Firethorn's interests.

This style of writing isn't for everyone--if you prefer the sort of fantasy worlds you'd like to vacation in, or you don't think bodily fluids should ever be mentioned in fiction, Firethorn isn't for you. It hardly needs to be said that there is sex and violence, although neither is gratuitous. Finally, for a first book in a trilogy, Firethorn gives little indication of the overarching conflict of the series; we can presume it has to do with the war, but we see nothing of that here. Yet the open-ended finale makes this a poor standalone novel.

With those caveats, I still highly recommend this book. Micklem is a strong and much-needed new voice in fantasy, and I hope to see many more books from her.

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## Alison Young says

A fantasy at its most brutal.

What's really fascinates me about this novel is that while it *is* a fantasy, the only magical device revolving around this alternate world is their religion and their gods. It's interesting how it plays out as whether or not if Firethorn can even feel them or it's just something of her subconsciousness.

Inspiration coming from the real-life medieval times, Micklem writes the character of Firethorn as what plenty of girls who weren't wealthy went through during that period. Which was, arguably, quite a lot.

Rape. Prostitution. Slaughter. Debauchery. All written in without a hesitancy, there's grit and grisliness all around.

Firethorn's character is different from most heroines in recent historical or fantasy novels. She isn't that "spunky girl ahead of her times"---something that is really irking me nowadays. People! You don't have to set a character **completely** apart from the age or place he/she lives in to make him/her "interesting"! A little realism doesn't hurt.

Firethorn goes through all the horrors of her world, through the consequences of being a drudge with no family to speak of (bad thing when your society is run by a caste system.) But no matter what her head is held high and she moves forward.

Her life only gets better when she becomes a Sheath (a sex companion for soldiers) for a nobleman going off to war.

The nobleman himself, Sire Galan, stands far apart from plenty of the smooth, charming love interests in today's novels.

He is a very flawed man. There are as many times that you want to hate him as much as you want to like him.

Micklem's prose is very delicately archaic, but also real and personal and does not shy away of what has to

be said ; definitely better than average unlike most first-time writers' stories that tend to be.

This story is not for everyone.

It's dark.

It's brutal.

It can be horrific even.

But it's also beautiful.

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### **Phil says**

Best look at a whole nother world as I've read in a long time. Gods, social hierarchy, plants, and all kinds of stuff that humans do are invented to flesh out Firethorn's reality. Excellent use of two days reading time. I hope there's a sequel.

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