



Spirit Gate

Kate Elliott

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World Fantasy and Nebula Award finalist Kate Elliott breaks new ground in a brilliantly original new fantasy set in a unique world of fabled cities, mysterious gods, and terrible dangers. From the first page readers will be swept up in the story of Mai and Captain Anji, as they become unwitting players in a conflict that began many years earlier, and which will shake the foundations of their land.

For hundreds of years the Guardians have ruled the world of the Hundred, but these powerful gods no longer exert their will on the world. Only the reeves, who patrol on enormous eagles, still represent the Guardians' power. And the reeves are losing their authority; for there is a dark shadow across the land that not even the reeves can stop.

A group of fanatics has risen to devour villages, towns, and cities in their drive to annihilate all who oppose them. No one knows who leads them; they seem inhumanly cruel and powerful. Mai and Anji, riding with a company of dedicated warriors and a single reeve who may hold a key to stopping the deadly advance of the devouring horde, must try, or the world will be lost to the carnage. But a young woman sworn to the Goddess may prove more important than them all . . . if they are not too late.

A haunting tale of people swept up by the chaos of war, this is superlative fantasy adventure, rich in texture, filled with color and excitement, masterfully crafted by a brilliantly gifted storyteller.

Spirit Gate Details

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From Reader Review Spirit Gate for online ebook

Grey says

Mild spoilers implied, be warned.

This book was tricky. Of all Elliott's works (so far), this one took me the longest to get into. The character introduced at the beginning turns out to be a fake-out lead, time skips and switching between numerous POVs until it finally gets settled a little after we meet the characters Shai, Mai, and Anji.

I'm glad I stuck through it, however long it took me, but there came a point when I realized I didn't want to put it down, because then I wanted all of them to meet! And meet they did, and how satisfying it was.

It suffers from some really bad inertia at the beginning for the first few chapters, so that might throw people off. If you can get through it, though, most of the characters are extremely likable. Mai and Anji steal the show, they're darling. Though Joss took me a while to warm up to, I ended up cheering for him most of all. Zubaidit is *hilarious* and cheeky and wonderful, I hope I see her in later books. I will admit I don't really have any love for Keshad - I understand where he's coming from, don't like him.

Shai is in a weird place for me, because I understand his necessity to the plot, but his necessity to the plot is hidden and his importance is only implied. At first I was frustrated because it seemed he was an entirely superfluous character, but it shows up at the end.

In terms of pacing, style, etc. this is not Elliott's strongest work. I would definitely still recommend it, as the story goes from tragedy to slow building thriller really nicely, and I at least came to care for the characters a lot. There is a budding mystery coming out and I'm extremely excited to start the next one, Shadow Gate, and see where that leads.

Some warnings: (this book is really not for everyone)

This book was also really graphic.

Sex: Some offscreen implied sex, some a bit explicit. It's nothing so shocking, you'll have seen more titillating stuff in fanfiction. If this is your first experience with sex in a fantasy novel, I guess?

Sexual violence: Some characters make verbal threats to do it or in their pov, say that they will. Specific descriptions of post-rape injuries. One minor villainous character is known to violate dead bodies and talks about it often.

Offshoot of that: Sex with slaves: Many characters have sex with slaves, talked about/implied in the narrative (sex with slaves, I would have to label it sexual abuse/sexual assault as there is not even a lick of consent present in these situations). One particular slave girl is "rented out" by her owner - when another character is angry and stops this, we see a small snapshot of the event itself before it stops.

Violence: The usual battles and gore, normal for adult fantasy. There is one scene in particular that stood out to me, though, roughly halfway through the book. Two characters are walking down a road and come across a scene of carnage where a small village was attacked. The character whose pov we are in includes some graphic descriptions of the dead bodies and the injuries the people must have sustained before/after they

died.

All that to say, this is far from the worst book I've read for sexual violence, violence, sex, etc. I personally wasn't bothered too much, Elliott wasn't gross/gratuitous about it and very little was depicted in the act, but I expect others may disagree on that. This is a strong YMMV.

Simcha Lazarus says

I admit that when I started *Spirit Gate* I was a bit thrown off because I had expected this book to be somewhat similar to the others that I had read by Kate Elliott, which it is not. The style in which *Spirit Gate* is written is very different from that of the *Crown of Stars* books and it just took me a little bit of time to adjust, though once I did the story quickly immersed me.

Some readers may have trouble with the fact that the story doesn't really focus on any one of the characters. I know that I usually find it essential to develop a connection with the characters in order to enjoy a book, but the scope of this story was so wide that it didn't bother me that the connection I developed with each character was minimal. Though I did feel that I got to know each of the characters enough to care about what happens to them. The style in which *Spirit Gate* was written actually reminds me quite a bit of Steven Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon*, though it was a lot easier to read. The epic feel to the story as well as the wide and detailed world building felt similar to Erikson's novel, though the characters are not quite as intense. There is also the same kind of vague feeling to the story regarding who the villains are and what the danger is. There are some references to the darkness or shadows taking over the land but what those shadows are is never clarified.

The pacing is slow but steady and the regular shifting of the point of view helped keep me interested, as did the different conflicts encountered by each of the characters.

On the back of *Spirit Gate* there is a quote from *Sci Fi Weekly* stating that this book is "a treasure for readers who enjoy the journey as much as, or more than, the destination," which I think is very aptly put. Where the characters are headed and what their purpose is in this endangered land, largely remains unclear, but it's the journey on which each of them have embarked that is the focus of this book. Kate Elliott has skillfully woven a wonderful story here with fantastic world building and interesting characters and I highly recommend it to all fantasy readers who enjoy a good epic tale.

To read a more detailed review of *Spirit Gate* visit [SFF Chat](#)

Wealththeow says

I wanted to like this book more than I actually did. Elliott has created numerous societies, each with their own distinct gender roles, politics, religion, food, etc. The societies and people are clearly all non-Western--they wear silk, eat yogurt, have brown hair and skin. There are POV characters from each of the big three (the Qin, the Hundred, and the Sirnakian Empire), and no one country or society is painted as morally better

than the others.

BUT. Elliott spends so much time building her world (and seriously, she describes every town, every wharf, every meal) that even by the end of the book there were huge plot holes and I still didn't love any of the characters. The basic plot is that some sort of shadowy menace is slowly inciting chaos in the Hundred while slowly destroying the eagle reeves (people psychically bonded to giant eagles who fly around mediating disputes). Merchant Mai and her new husband Anji, the captain of the Qin army that conquered her homeland, travel into the Hundred in search of a new home. Emo reeve Joss tries to figure out why his homeland is descending into lawlessness. Their paths only cross near the end of the novel.

This wasn't a bad novel, but I'm not interested enough to read the next in the series.

Josie says

I don't know. I found that it was a little bit hard to get in to at first because it's slow and the story line tends to drag on for a bit then suddenly jump through time without letting the reader get a feel for the story properly. I also really hoped that I would get to know more about some characters like Marit who you barely hear about, so I was a bit disappointed in that respect.

But, I found that reading the next books made the first book make more sense. So when I went back to the first book I enjoyed it much more.

Some things I did like was the whole guardian mystery that they have introduced and the idea of 'reeves', because honestly, who doesn't want a giant eagle protecting them. I also liked how she portrayed Anji and Mai's relationship. The interaction between the two is sweet.

No author can be amazing and write awesome things all the time.

I did enjoy this book the second time I am reading it, so I encourage those that didn't get in to it the first time, to read it again so they can fully enjoy it as I did.

Catherine Fitzsimmons says

This is the story of a struggling land succumbing to bandits and civil war in the wake of the disappearance of the legendary Guardians that once presided over the land and kept peace.

Despite the interesting cover image, Spirit Gate was very disappointing. None of the characters was very likable, most were painfully cliché or annoying, and the writing came across as juvenile, which was the biggest deterrent to enjoyment. It got off to a bad start as the main character in the opening of the novel reeked of Mary Sue, went into detail with things that had no relevance whatsoever to the story and which ultimately didn't matter because said character was killed not three chapters in to the novel. By about halfway through, it got a little better, but not enough to redeem it, only to make it tolerable. There was far too much setting description bogging down the story, usually about setting aspects that had no relevance to the story or even the scene in which it appeared, and the use of capitalized words as names – the Barrens, the Wild, the Thread, the Cliffs, etc. – was severely overused.

In short, it was not an enjoyable read and it does not come with my recommendation. I am not interested in continuing the series this book began and I am sorely disinclined to pick up any of the author's other books.

Monica says

This was a very interesting and unique fantasy story. It would have been rated higher for me if the plot was a bit faster-paced. Unfortunately it felt like it was unnecessarily slow-paced in the middle of the novel. I loved the setting though, and the characters were intriguing. I might give this series another read sometime when I have gotten through my giant to-read list!

Pauline Ross says

Fantasy Review Barn

I love this book. Or perhaps I should say - I *did* love this book, for a whole two chapters. It featured a wonderful, independent, self-assured female protagonist, who was completely comfortable in her own skin. Hurrah! A character I could really root for!

And then she's never seen again. She existed for a whole two chapters purely to motivate a male character, who then mopes and whines and drinks and whinges (while also enjoying himself with other women) for (get this) nineteen years. I was so mad I almost gave up on the book altogether at that point. But OK, there are some points of interest in miserable Joss. His job, for instance, which requires him to ride a giant eagle (cool or what?). His friends are intriguing, too. And the world-building is detailed and interesting, although the author insists on hitting us over the head with endless minutiae. So, fine, I'm grumpy about losing my female protagonist, but I'm along for the ride.

And then we switch yet again to some other part of the world, which isn't even on the map (aaargh!), and we have a whole other culture to learn about, and a new set of characters - quiet Mai, who's deeper than she looks, her mysterious new husband Anji, and Mai's uncle Shai, who's - well, stupid is the first word that comes to mind. And they're trekking endlessly and for no obvious reason through trackless desert, while periodically being attacked by bandits, sandstorms and demons. Why? What are they even doing there? Why are there no sensible roads between one populated part of the world and another?

It's an odd thing, but in fantasy a group of travellers can never cross a desert without being hit by a sandstorm. You can bet they will run out of water as well, and only find an oasis in the nick of time. If they pass through hill country, they'll be attacked by bandits. And any journey undertaken in winter will encounter a terrific snowstorm. If the author had cut out all this extraneous travelling and contrived drama, and just skipped to the real action, the book would be a quarter of its length, but it would rattle along nicely.

So here we are at 30% of the way through, and we're still travelling endlessly with Captain Anji and Mai and Shai, no sign of the interesting eagle riders, and all that's happened is that Mai has been inexplicably smitten with love for her dull husband, Shai is learning to use a spear and...zzzzzzz. What? Sorry, hard to stay awake. Oh yes, and nice Captain Anji has been keeping Very Big Secrets from his wife.

You know what? I don't care. I just can't get invested in any of these characters. I know something's going to happen eventually, and I totally approve of epic fantasy that sprawls itself over whole continents at a glacial pace if it has depth (which this has), but it also has to have characters that carry the story. For me, these just don't cut it, not when the most promising one was written out after two chapters. Lots of people

love this series, and I've been told that this book gets better at the halfway point, but I just don't have the will to keep going. One star for a DNF.

Brownbetty says

Kate Elliot reminds me of a slightly less noir George R.R. Martin, but full disclosure: Martin's too dark and slow-moving for my taste, so this is not quite the endorsement it might be from someone who loves Martin unreservedly. I have always wondered why Elliot seems to have missed the acclaim given Martin.

A lot of the action is political, but some of it seems to be spiritual, which is not to say that people can't suddenly die from sepsis. (See, this is why it reminds me of GRRM!)

Once again in *Shit I Ought To Have Been Told On the Cover*: this is book one in a series. Thanks, publisher, I really enjoy being tricked into reading the first book when I would have waited until the rest were published, had I known.

I had some difficulty getting through this book, partly because Elliot follows a large cast who don't really interact with, or in many cases, know about the existence of each other for much of the book. But part of my difficulty was that this was a fairly complex book: four, perhaps five fully realized cultures, several political systems, and multiple religions are interacting, not in a simplistic way, and Elliot never stops the action to explain things to you, so you either catch on as it whirls past or you hope it gets clear later.

Elliot isn't showy about it, but her book tackles, and manages to portray holistically, I think, colonialism, debt-bondage, slavery, race, and gender, in more or less that order.

It's not terribly clear from the cover-art, but nearly everyone in the book is some shade of brown which is treated as completely normal, and I do remember hearing Elliot explain on a panel last year that she actually had to fight to get the person depicted on the cover to be given some colour.

Tim says

Rather than throwing in the usual bells and whistles of the fantasy genre, the underappreciated Kate Elliott prefers to work with, well, a full band, intricate but not obvious, including some smaller instruments that don't sound like much but that contribute to the overall sound. Elliott's quite excellent previous series, the seven-volume *Crown of Stars*, was keep-your-distance daunting to those not that into 5,000-plus page epics and ripples-within-ripples plotting. It went off in too many directions, but in a way that made it the rich saga it was. Her *Crossroads* series, apparently another seven-volume beast but with a more palatable trilogy/standalone/trilogy format in the offing, cuts down on the fantasy fireworks even more than usual and seems likely to be more focused than *Crown of Stars*. We'll see.

Still, Elliott is all about meticulous world-building, character, intricate plotting and taking her own sweet time and, based on the opening volume (the first three are completed) she's right on course.

Figurative shadows are creeping across the Hundred, a vast land patrolled by reeves borne by giant eagles. The reeves are like police or rangers, but their numbers are decreasing. In addition, the Guardians, supposedly immortal beings who function as emissaries from the gods, unseen protectors, appear to all be

dead. Or did they ever exist? No one alive has seen one (so they think). "Spirit Gate"'s "viewpoint" third-person chapters follow, among many, Joss and his discovery of corruption among his fellow reeves; Keshad, who sells a person into slavery to free himself of his debt slavery; Mai, who lives far away from the Hundred and whose merchant family arranges her marriage to Anji, captain of the region's Qin conquerors. Anji, kept from ruling and exiled by his family's double-dealing, with Mai along and their relationship slowly blossoming, hires out himself and a band of Qin as protection for a caravan that brings him to the distant Hundred, and his skills make him a key figure in preventing a marauding army from sacking a southwest Hundred city sold out by its own council. Other POV characters are a reeve who's turned his back on duty, and Mai's uncle Shai, who as an unlucky seventh son can see and hear ghosts and who's on a quest to find the bones of his apparently dead brother.

"Spirit Gate" and the series itself present a tale of those entrusted with power and guardianship going bad; strong women; the subtle layers of slavery; death and rebirth. There's an undercurrent of the lack of choice in what your life becomes: reeves are chosen by eagles; slaves and masters sometimes are born into their roles, though freedom can be earned; the Guardians have had no choice in becoming such; the year of your birth and your birth order supposedly strongly influence your character and place in life; there are exiles and there are hunted. As expected, Elliott is deft in her handling of characters, down to the nonhuman ones. The relationships between reeves and their eagles feels right, and the beasts are treated not as cuddly carriers but as powerful, dangerous animals. As further evidence that we're not in rote Tolkien territory here, this also is one of the few fantasy series that actually acknowledges that living beings produce bodily waste.

The setting has an Asian/Middle Eastern sort of feel to it (nearly everyone is brown-skinned, and the rare blond-haired, blue-eyed types are regarded as — or perhaps actually are — demons), and the world Elliott creates has both monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Elliott also is particularly adept with her very capable female characters. They shape their own little (or big) worlds in their own subtle (or obvious) ways. Again, Elliott's methods are of the meticulous and not the slam-bang variety, though there is good action. I'd say Crossroads, after what I think is probably a heavy scene-setter in "Spirit Gate" (which does drag occasionally and is, in truth, 3.5 stars) is very likely to be inferior to Crown of Stars, but then, Crown of Stars, despite its failings, was one of the best fantasy series I've read. With the Guardians apparently in a tug-of-war, there should be lots of plotting and bloodshed ahead.

Doc Opp says

Elliott sure knows how to weave a masterful yarn. Very creative and suspenseful. Also with a more limited scope than her first series, so there aren't as many plotlines and characters to follow which makes it less confusing and more readable. I enjoyed the book so much that I went to 2 bookstores and a library to find the sequel. Which I really don't have time to read, but I'm making time by foregoing other important activities (like sleep)

Nick Fagerlund says

I'm kind of sad that I didn't like this enough to finish it, because it had all these clever little flourishes that I dug. Like the way it seemed to be setting up the eagle reeves as a Pern-y wish fulfillment companion animal thing, and then described the eagles as "smart as pigs... but no smarter." Or the way the author killed off the

putative main character at the end of chapter 2. Or how the most impressive force for maintaining order in the Hundred is actually totally weak-ass and only has power to the extent that the populace *thinks* they do.

But I read for characters, not world-building, and I ultimately didn't give enough of a shit about these people to keep slogging. Mai was boring and over-perky; Mongol captain Anji was boring and perfect; Mai's brother was boring and dumb-ass; and Joss showed a bit of promise, but not enough, and his dead ladyfriend was totally going to get better. About the only guy I really *liked* was The Snake, a total asshole who just happened to be on the right side and good at his job. But alas, there was no way he was gonna carry the remaining half of the book, so I stopped. Too much other good stuff on my plate.

Things I learned/re-learned from this book: Made-up swears sound *extremely silly*. Use them sparingly, make sure they roll off the tongue, and for Christ's sake, leaven your made-up blasphemies with some good old-fashioned fuckshits.

Fayley says

This is the first book of a 3 book series and Kate Elliot again proves her ability to write fantastic female characters. The world building is interesting, believable and real.

The characters are complete multiple faceted and like able, I cared about what happened to them. Throughout this series Kate Elliott explores the path and consequences of power-lust and the corruptibility of people. The start is a bit weird in that it introduces characters that seem irrelevant for the remainder of the book, but keep going it's definitely worth it. Book 2 is a bit dark and has some harrowing war scenes you may need to skip.

ambyr says

I have a Kate Elliott problem, and it is this: every book she's ever written has a summary that makes it sound *exactly* like the sort of thing I want to read. Complex characters, deep anthropological worldbuilding, shades of moral gray . . . yes, please!

And then I *read* the book, and I am reminded, yet again, that my brain and Elliott's writing mix like stiletto heels and a muddy field. I try to trudge through, because what I can see on the horizon is awesome, but it's a painful battle, staggering and squelching each step of the way.

And it's not that Elliott's writing is bad in any objective sense (except, perhaps, a tendency toward over description and occasional redundancy--ascending up hills, things like that). It's just . . . not how I think. Which is too bad, because the ideas that infuse it are awesome.

I liked this more than *Cold Magic*, so I'm going to try to finish the series. But it might take a while.

Sean says

My god, Kate Elliott loves the sound of her own writing. Too bad I didn't—and too bad I didn't like the unlikeable characters, the glacial, wandering plot or the confusing geography. Give this one a pass.

Benjamin says

Decent, but I wasn't blown away. The best part of the book was some strong characterization. Not every character got this, but most of them did. When the book was focused on this and not the bigger picture, I quite enjoyed it.

Despite the good stuff, I had some major reservations with some aspects of the world-building. First, I couldn't figure out exactly why the reeves were supposed to be so important, and so when things start to go wrong for them right off the bat, it didn't make any sense why it was a problem. The source of their authority is supposedly the Guardians, but even by the end of book we still don't know enough.

In particular however, I had a hard time believing the "rot/corruption" had spread over the Hundred for over twenty years, *twenty years*, and still no one has much of a frigging clue even when two armies suddenly show up out of nowhere. Are there no foot or horse messengers? (Finally mentioned towards the end.) Why does no one speak up when they have the chance? Is no one playing both sides against the middle? I think the real issue here is that it felt like these things were skipped over merely for the sake of the plot to create a false sense of drama.

It may not sound like I liked the book at all when I did. It's just hard to explain when there's a lot that doesn't make sense. A lot of people probably won't have the problems I did, but personally I can't give the book more than three stars. I will probably finish the trilogy since I already have the sequels. I won't put a high priority on it though.

Nathan says

Want deep world building that doesn't seem pretentious? Want differing cultures without the cliché of monolithic fantasy "races." And would you like a pretty good story to go with it? I must say, Kate Elliott my a have a book to hook you on a series.

The setting is fairly unique. The main story takes place in a land called the Hundred, which is home of the Reeves, giant eagle riders. They follow the laws set by mysterious Guardians, enforced by the Reeves for generations, but things are of course changing. Down south there is a Empire that doesn't get a lot of play in the story, and a nomadic horse culture that currently rules a strong merchant based culture.

There is also a fair amount of spiritualism, which usually doesn't appeal to me, but Elliott wove it in without it taking over.

There were a few cons. The characters are all good looking boys and girls, and some follow clichés early on. The tortured soul of a hero and a female that seems to be a direct knock off of Dany from ASOIAF are the worst offenders. As the book goes on they gain some personality, so not a major gripe.

Biggest issue was a bit of bad editing about halfway through. Through the whole book we follow multiple PoV's chronologically (that is the time line is constant, switching views). But in one section we follow the same character to a end, then go back in time and have another character wonder what he is up to. Takes away the tension.

Still, loved the book, can't wait for the next.

edit after finishing the series: For series review, go [here](#).

Jacqie says

I really loved Kate Elliott's Crown of Stars series, set in a fantasy world very close to medieval Europe. The people felt authentic and the world was very rich. However, I bounced off her Spiritwalker series set in an alternate Victorian era. I know that Elliott takes diversity seriously and wanted to give her Crossroads series, set in an alternate fantasy Asia, a try.

However, for whatever reason, the book didn't draw me in. Maybe part of it was that it's a looong book at almost 700 pages, and about 100 pages in I knew from the back cover that I hadn't even met about half of the main characters yet. Perhaps it was that ineffable quality that allows me to fall into a book was missing- I couldn't picture myself there, couldn't "feel" the world. Maybe it's just that I've been in a bit of a reading rut lately and am especially impatient.

Maybe it's me, not you, Kate Elliott. We'll try again with another book.

Emily says

I don't know. I love the concept of Kate Elliot books, but always feel a little let down with the delivery. I'm never sure exactly why. In theory this sounds like a great book and maybe the second book will explain a lot more and make me feel more satisfied. I had read almost two hundred pages before anything other than the introduction of characters was over. In fact the first two hundred pages didn't even introduce the people who were the main characters. I don't know. I did finish it, but I'm not sure if I would read the second one or not. I'm not sure if I care enough about the characters to find out what happens to them. I did like Anji and Mai and even Joss, but for some reason I just couldn't connect with them. And when you did finally connect with them, the author would move onto another tangent of the story. Maybe that was it. I felt there were too many tangents and not enough focus on the main story, which I probably would have enjoyed on its own. And seriously I still have no idea who Bia is.

Thomas says

The idea of my reading Kate Elliot's work was to expand the number of female fantasy authors in my library. I wasn't quite sure where to start since I had heard mixed reviews about each of her three main series. In the end I decided on Crossroads because this appealed most to my taste in fantasy.

I was not disappointed. The author, in my opinion, produced a marvellous piece of work. We are introduced

to a land called the Hundred. It's inhabited by a peace keeping force called Reeves. Two of which are Joss and Marit. They use Eagles to transport themselves across the land. To the far south of the land a young woman by the name of Mai is claimed as a bride by Qin officer Captain Anji.

The plot of Spirit Gate is a strong one establishing all storylines with solid foundations and builds on most of them well. There is, however, one exception in the middle of book when Elliot chooses to flash back in order to link specific characters. I found this frustrating.

I really liked the majority of the characters; my favourites being Mai and Zubaidit, these two really stood out and were both incredibly strong women. I liked Anji as well.

The pacing is somewhat slow to begin with, but this is helped by the multiple POV structure. I found the more I got into the story, the more it seemed to flow, and if you like epic finales, you won't be disappointed.

The world building that Elliot crafted was well done. She has developed a very vivid picture for her readers and never overloads them with unnecessary passages of description. Combining this with her characters makes the story a highly engrossing read.

Spirit Gate was not a perfect read by my standards and has a few minor flaws but apart from that was absolutely great. I look forward to reading Volume 2 of the series and am pleased to give Spirit Gate 4 stars out of 5.

Res says

The one where strangers from various lands come together to fight something that's only beginning to come clear at the end of the book. (Because this is one of those books where 'trilogy' means 'a single novel that happens to be published in three volumes.') Joss the reeve rides a giant eagle and fights crime and is incorruptible and grieving like the hero of a Western; pretty Mai takes a foreign husband and thus gets to leave her repressive culture, bringing along her kinsman, Shai, who can see ghosts; Keshad will go to any length to buy his freedom from slavery.

This is an epic. And the reason I don't like epics is because the Big Story crowds out all the small stories.

There are so many small stories here that I'm so very interested in -- what will Keshad do if he achieves the goal of his entire life at twenty-three? Is it possible for Mai and Anji to have a good marriage in spite of their cultural differences and the fact that they're strangers? Will Shai ever find a place for himself in the world, or discover what happened to his missing brother?

But all that is shoved out to the edges of the story to make room for the defense of the city of Olossi, which in turn is only the thin edge of the defense of the Entire World from the Mysterious Gathering Darkness. And, honestly, I'd sacrifice four hundred pages of the Entire World in exchange for four detailed pages of, say, Mai and Anji settling a disagreement about whether to eat beans or rice.

This is a matter of priorities, of course, and readers who like epics may enjoy this a great deal. I was never bored, exactly, though the length and the level of detail were dismaying at times, and there needed to be about 75% less gratuitous geography.

I adored the worldbuilding, especially the various religions. And In general, I cared about and believed in all the characters, with a few exceptions: First, Keshad totally changed when Zubaidit came on the scene, becoming cowardly and passive. Second, Zubaidit herself wasn't at all believable, maybe because we never got her POV and maybe because she just happened to be where every problem was, and just happened to have the skills to solve it. Third, I quickly lost patience with Joss; I get that he's disabled by grief and alcohol, but even so, after nineteen years of bucking a corrupt system, you'd think he'd either develop a little tact and political skill or else realize that what was called for was basically a revolution.

Yay for having a likeable secondary character be gay; boo for sidelining him with an injury and going three hundred pages without even telling me whether he was alive or dead. (Also boo for only *one* gay character, out of about four hundred named characters in the book?)

(Jo Walton rec)
