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In a land threatened by treacherous war and beset by demons, royal dowager Ista, released from the curse of madness and manipulated by an untrustworthy god, is plunged into a desperate struggle to preserve the endangered souls of a realm.

Paladin of Souls Details

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From Reader Review Paladin of Souls for online ebook

Mike says

I love, LOVE the protagonist of this book. She's not a great warrior, or a skillful rogue, or a powerful wizard, or anything like that. She's not even a not-great warrior or a not-powerful wizard who grows more powerful as the story progresses.

She's a middle aged woman who really wants a vacation.

Ista was a fairly minor character in *Curse of Chalion*, albeit one who was hugely affected by the events of that book. Here, she's been restored to full sanity, and chafing at the restrictions of her (loving) caretakers who can't see that she no longer needs the caretaking. By sheer force of will, she bullies her way into going on a religious pilgrimage, and the story builds from there.

She's a wonderfully cynical character, and this was a sedate, very adult story - much as the previous book was. While we don't see Cazavril at all (though he's mentioned plenty of times), this was an excellent addition to the world of Chalion, expanding and deepening the world.

I still have trouble believing this is the same author who writes the action packed, overly clever Vorkosigan Saga, but I suppose she's just that talented.

Felicia says

This book is an outstanding followup to the first in the series (that I actually read so long ago I didn't quite remember, but it didn't really matter). There are beautiful twists in storytelling here, and a very interesting mature woman character. I found the storytelling refreshing and the characters engaging on a fantasy-level, with a bit of romance (but nothing to turn off guys ;)). Lois Bujold is an author that transcends genre, definitely check it out!

Allison says

Updated Review Sept 12, 2015:

I always find it really difficult to review those books that I experience at a gut level and love completely irrationally. This was one of those. I simply enjoyed reading every moment of it, and don't know how to explain why. Now I've put it off for too long, and I'm going to try anyway.

First of all, if you've read *The Curse of Chalion*, you need to know that the pacing and focus of this book is completely different. That one was epic, full of political intrigue and kingdom-wide conflicts. This is not. It mostly takes place in a remote fortress and focuses on characters more than kingdom. So the pace is much different, and may seem slow if you're expecting action-driven plot. Now that that's out of the way...

I really loved that the main character is a middle-aged woman. It's not often that you get someone with more experience as a main character in Fantasy. In this case, Ista has already lived a life. She was married to the (now dead) king, and has grown children who are out of the picture. But although everyone around her

believes that's all she's allotted to get out of life, she is not by any means old and is completely stifled. She still needs to find out who she can be, just as much as any young protagonist out there. So we get a mature woman who escapes from home and her caretakers to find adventure and a new life for herself. Hurray!

Maybe it's the fact that I am no longer a fledgling myself, but her story really resonated with me. Her observations about life and people were so spot on for someone who has lived more than 30 years. Plus, I really liked her. I wanted to be her. Since this is a character-driven story, that's kind of important.

Aside from Ista, there's a full cast of characters to complement her, and I enjoyed all of them (except the ones I wasn't supposed to). It's been a couple months since I read this, and I still remember at least six of the characters even if I've forgotten their names. There's the monk, two soldier brothers who actually have their own personalities, a female messenger turned lady's maid, and a dynamic lord of the fortress whose brother is mysteriously ill. The mystery of the brother's illness is where the story really gets going, in case you haven't been hooked yet by that point.

What drives the plot are the mystery behind the brother's illness, and problems of god-possession and demon-possession. Ista has been touched by a god before, and was considered insane for years. Now she wants to avoid anything to do with gods because they can't be trusted. Yeah, that doesn't work out so well for her. Once a god notices you, it's impossible to ignore them.

Maybe it built a little slowly, but it captivated me, really from the start. I loved the development of the characters through it all, and the complexity that was revealed over time. How it turned out left me breathless. I was enjoying it so much that I was afraid the ending would disappoint, so I was almost giddy with relief that it didn't. I really loved it. And I know I haven't explained why well enough at all, and used too many words to do it.

Initial Review June 27, 2015:

I loved pretty much every minute of this. Why did I wait so long to read it?? I'll try to write a proper review later.

Carol. says

Unexpectedly captivating.

I'm a longtime fantasy reader, but I've gotten tired of the current crop of twenty year old heroines, the descriptions of their clothes, their vague struggles with boyfriends, and the development of their special powers. Even if coming-into-one's power storylines are set with werewolves and vampires, a certain uniformity starts to develop. Paladin does something I never expected in an epic fantasy; she's written a thoughtful coming-of-age story focused on a forty-year old noblewoman who has been fighting her 'god-touched' connection for years.

Ista is an interesting, complex female lead that is reaching toward change, even if she isn't exactly sure how to get there. She's had emotional scarring in her past, and years of a cursed "madness" coupled with her status as a royal have kept her wrapped in a cocoon. However, she recognizes this and longs for some unspecified alternative. "The dullness of her life, the stalemate of her soul since then was just long habit." She develops a plan to escape her highly protected life under the guise of a pilgrimage visiting various gods' shrines. It's part of the underlying irony that this is Ista's justification for travel when she secretly hates the gods and their interference in her life.

While some events happen *to* her in the beginning, she begins to take more authority over her choices and decisions little by little, until it is partly her energy and leadership that (view spoiler) Her entourage is an interesting group as well. Liss, a courier pressed into service as a lady's maid, made me laugh when they first tried to work out how to manage Ista's hair. "You do your own, presumably. What do you do with it?" "Well, I put it in a braid..." "Do you do the horses?" "Oh yes, my lady. Snail braids, and dressed with ribbons..." It's a charming little snippet of dialogue that shows Ista's willingness to step outside her traditional boundaries.

Bujold has a very unexpected way of dealing with demons, god-possession and life-energy. Part of Ista's struggles are a personal and theological grudge against the deities of her world from events that happened during her early marriage. Even within the framework of the system Bujold has created, she manages to take the spiritual angles of the magic and demon system to unexpected places. (view spoiler) A demon-ridden woman, initially set up to be a negative and opposing force, develops into a tragic figure by the end of the story.

Bujold's writing is a perfect mix of description and action. I enjoyed her imagery and use of language. The subtle ways she shows us Ista's confinement at court; the pacing, bouncing her foot furiously beneath a gown, a well-meaning handmaiden taking the outside edge of a steep walkway all go so much farther to convey the feeling than a mere "Ista was frustrated." Ista herself is quite a woman, with intelligence and depths of character; her moments of sly humor streaking through her thoughts bring a smile to Ista and the reader, even as she conceals her thoughts from her surrounding company. "She wondered, a little dryly, if the school also had a particularly fine cook." "She approached the possessed animal, who lowered its head again... in what might be submission, love or dementia."

Yet while Ista develops and pushes herself in new directions, Bujold wisely keeps transformations believable. (view spoiler). All in all, a well-balanced and nicely developed book that deserves its many awards.

Mayim de Vries says

"I do not speak to you as your royina. I do not even speak as one god-touched. I speak as a woman, who has walked to the end of that road and returns to report the hazards."

Middle-aged woman, a widowed mother of two, believed to be deranged (well, at least not entirely right in her head) is certainly not your typical fantasy heroine. But just like it was in the first instalment in the World of the Five Gods series, Ms Bujold proves to be very adept at creating the most unusual protagonists. As Zaara said *"Bujold is the sabre-tooth tigress mama with all those Hugos and Nebulas tucked away in her den."* The prizes (and the praise) are not without merit.

First things first. While for me The World of the Five Gods is a superb fantasy, I believe **this series is for a mature and well-versed reader. If all you know is contemporary YA fantasy and/or hack-and-slash adventuring novels, I'd advise you to go and read elsewhere for a decade or two and then come back if you want to fully appreciate this book** and avoid the frustration of failed expectations.

There are **three main pillars upon which this great story is built: incredible world-building, wonderful character development and a wholesome story; neither an adventure nor a romance or a philosophical treatise and at the same time all little bit of all.**

"Who am I, when I am not surrounded by the walls of my life? When they have all fallen into dust and rubble?"

You would think that there is no need for worldbuilding since *The Paladin of Souls* is the second instalment in the series and a very detailed account of the settings has already been provided by Cazaril in the previous book. You couldn't be more wrong. Ms Bujold is a great architect and while she has built a great palace, she had taken the reader to tour only the ground floor in the *Curse of Chalion*. Presently, she shows us the basements, and the gardens and even some rooms that have up to date been locked. **The basic layout remains the same, but there are new details that on the one hand fit with the already familiar background, and on the other bring new spark and shine.** Another striking thing is **the ability to paint the things and people we thought we knew (from the previous book) in an entirely different light.** Like it wasn't the world and people we knew. Like it was some strange landscape, entirely different and because of that, even more interesting.

I admire **Bujold's writing; her unique style is informative without being info-dumpy, lyrical but avoiding pompousness, reflexive but not turning into a self-help textbook and showing, showing the most important things through gestures and words unsaid.** You should see my copy of the book with tons of notes and highlights. I know that such super reflexive and intimate writing is not for everyone, but for me, it works. I ponder with the main heroine, I feel Ista, and even though I liked her previously already, I bond with her the more easily.

"It's only a habit, you know. I'm not mad anymore, really."

Ista was one of my favourites in *The Curse of Chalion* and I was very excited that she has been given the centre of the stage this time. And she **grows, my how she grows, from the mad and forlorn woman trapped into her life of function and position into an independent and conscious mistress of her own ways and choices.**

The plot is simple; three years have passed since the divine curse has been broken by Lord dy Cazaril. **Ista escapes the confines of her late mother's castle** under the pretext of a pious amble around the countryside travelling incognito. The whole scheme is a sham as Ista is not on the speaking terms with the gods and her scarred soul still bleeds in the darkness. But because the gods are strangely attracted to her especially that apparently **a demonic infestation is underway**, the initial travelogue quickly changes into **a tale of, not redemption, but one of rediscovery and also forgiveness.**

"A disaster out of season, I surely am."

In addition to the **theological turbulences**, Ista meets a scion of dy Lutez family and his wife in what is **one of the most refreshing love triangles I had the pleasure to read**, so unlike the mundane love triangles that kill the YA genre (view spoiler). There is also **a shared mortal wound** that will make you wonder in how many different ways might three people kill two of each other with one knife and **a singularly unusual siege.**

In addition to those already mentioned, there is also a pleiad of other characters, some that we have been already acquainted with, and some new ones, including Liss, courier turned lady-in-waiting, brothers Foix and Ferde dy Gura, learned Chivan dy Cabon, a priest of the Bastard with the Lord Bastard himself making an appearance. They all, the divine and the mundane, revolve around Ista, solemn Ista, angry Ista, iron Ista but also hilarious Ista. She does have a stinging wit. I chuckled at her retorts or mental responses more than once.

"Lord Bastard, you bastard."

Damn, but Bujold can write divinities. I nearly laughed out loud at Ista's first encounter with the god. And her daunt, defiant attitude is just great. Usually, in fantasy we are served with a figure of a faithful versus the

divine, not somebody who hates the gods and curses them vehemently instead of praying graces. But most importantly, it **all makes sense. There are no holes in the story, no stray ends, and no conveniences. All is sound and deep.**

I think I liked the Paladin of Souls at least as much as I did the predecessor if not more. It is **not only a pleasant and captivating read but also a valuable one** – a thing that becomes a rarity in contemporary fantasy.

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Also in the series:

1. The Curse of Chalion ★★★★★
 3. The Hallowed Hunt
-

Gavin says

The was more of a spin-off from Curse of Chalion rather than a regular sequel but that did not stop it from retaining most of the elements that made the first book such a good story. The pacing is fairly sedate but Bujold has an engaging style and this character driven story mixes in more than enough magic, mystery, action, and even a tad of romance to keep things interesting!

Curse of Chalion was Cazaril's story but Paladin of Souls switched focus and gave us Ista's story. We met the Dowager Royina Ista in the first book and I enjoyed following her on her quest for redemption and spiritual healing now that she has been freed from the dark curse of Chalion. Ista was not quite as easy to like as Cazaril but she was likeable enough despite her imperfections and still an easy character to root for.

The story was an interesting one. Ista, feeling stifled in her home of Valenda, decides a pilgrimage would be the perfect way to break the drudgery of her life. It could have been a relaxing holiday but the Bastard had other plans and tried his best to draw Ista back into the dealings of the Gods. I liked the story and we got to learn a lot more about the nature of the Gods and also about demons!

All in all I enjoyed this one a lot but not quite as much as Curse of Chalion. It had just a tiny bit less mystery than the first book and the character in Curse of Chalion were also just a tiny bit more interesting on the whole. Still, we are talking about small margins and that did match Curse of Chalion for quality in most ways and was definitely a worthy sequel.

Rating: 4 stars.

Audio Note: The was narrated by Kate Reading. She gave a typically fantastic performance.

John Patrick Schutz says

Quite possibly the best fiction I've read in a decade. I was always fond of Lois McMaster Bujold's "Vorkosigan Series" of Science-Fiction books - always rollicking good fun while having deep underlying issues that make the reader remember them long after all the action and humor have faded to the background... but when Bujold decided to turn her hand to grand fantasy she found even more.

The first book of this grouping, "The Curse of Chalion" grabbed me from the first page. As a fan of Tolkein who does NOT enjoy most of the imitators and pretenders that simply don't have the depth of plot, deeper issues, facility with language, and creation of a fully realized alternate reality I was thrilled to find Bujold a worthy successor to Tolkein and Ursula LeGuin.

However, her second book in this loosely associated trio - "Paladin of Souls" took me from thrilled to astonishment. Not at all what one expects in a fantasy, our main character is a middle-aged noble woman, former Royina (Queen-Consort) and now "Dowager Royina" (mother of the current monarch). Only in her mid-forties, she is perceived as having served her purpose and is now no longer useful. In fact, she's considered slightly mad, though the reader will discover that assumption to be quite wrong. Troubled by a recurring dream, she embarks on what is ostensibly a religious pilgrimage, but is frankly an escape from those who would smother her with good intentions but slowly wring the life from her soul.

What she finds is remarkable, inspiring and frightening. The book brought me, a grown 40-something man to tears of heartbreak, rage and overwhelming joy on several occasions - and I've heard other men, usually not the type, respond in the same way. It is not a surprise that this book won just about every award a science-fiction/fantasy novel CAN win.

The follow-up third book "The Hallowed Hunt", is just as captivating as the first book "Chalion", and though it does not reach the soaring apex of the soul that "Paladin" achieves, it is in no way a letdown. It still has moments of staggering beauty and painful goodness, and brings us back to earth from the heights of the central novel.

The grouping is so wonderful that after reading each at its initial publication (2001, 2003, 2005) I have since re-read them twice. The "finish" date is for my most recent reading. I recommend this series even to those who do not generally go for "Grand Fantasy" as this is true Grand Fantasy, NOT a "swords and sorcery" stamped-out rehashed pulp novel. The issues and emotions dealt with here are much more evolved and thoughtful than any pretender to Tolkein's throne could be. Dare I say it, her insight into emotions and motivations is better than that of Tolkein, who did not let us see into the very souls of his heroes and heroines the way Bujold bares the very core of her protagonists.

Clouds says

Following the resounding success of my Locus Quest, I faced a dilemma: which reading list to follow it up with? Variety is the spice of life, so I've decided to diversify and pursue six different lists simultaneously. This book falls into my LOCUS FANTASY list.

As the Locus Sci-Fi Award winners list treated me so kindly, I figure I'll trust those same good folk to pick me some stars in their sister-list, the Locus Fantasy Award winners.

While I was predominantly reading my way through every winner of the Locus Sci-Fi award, I decided to sample a few of the equivalent Fantasy winners. I'd already read a good percentage of the 21st century winners (all the Mieville, Gaiman, Pratchett, etc) so I decided to fill in a few of those gaps. I ordered a trio of books: *Paladin of Souls* (2004 winner), *The Privilege of the Sword* (2007 winner) and *Lavinia* (2009 winner). This is my pick of the three – it was a whisker away from getting a four star rating from me.

This is the second book of the Chalion trilogy, but I read it out of order and have only recently gotten around to buying the first in the series (*Curse of Chalion*). The events of that book are occasionally referred to, but

as going-ons from the distant past with no direct bearing on the current plot, so *Curse of Chalion* is certainly not essential reading to appreciate *Paladin of Souls*, which stands up just fine on its own.

Bujold takes an unconventional approach to her female lead. I'm casting my mind about for other adult fantasy woks with a female lead and I've got Phedre's Trilogy (young and sexy), Thursday Next (young and smart), Mistborn (young and dangerous), Greywalker (young and sassy), *The Privilege of the Sword* (young and romantic), *Lavinia* (young and homely) – what I aint seeing a whole caboodle of is anything comparable to *Paladin of Souls* (middle-aged and dotty).

That's not being entirely fair to our heroine here, Ista – she's far more than just dotty. She's a complex, intelligent, god-touched (bit mental), bitter and depressed noblewoman, who's trying to seize control of her cosseted life from her overly-controlling family. She dragoons an independent-minded female horseback courier into being her lady's maid, collars an obese priest from an inappropriate sect, and then convinces her family to release her on a religious pilgrimage. Magical adventure ensues.

Paladin of Souls is written superbly; likeable characters, some good action scenes, a nice little mystery at the heart of the plot and a solidly constructed and imaginative world, faith and magic system. I've become a big fan of Bujold's work with her Vorkosigan Saga and a lot of the trademark wry wit and quips are here – yet I've scored this lower than any of her sci-fi works. Why?

I enjoyed it, no doubt about that, and as I said at the start – it was only a whisker away from a four-star, "I loved it" rating – but I had just a few too many reservations, none of which were individually overwhelming but cumulatively they weighed me down. I found it a bit predictable. While the variations on fantasy tropes were imaginative, none were a revelation. The overall tone felt a bit safe. And, while I can applaud the brave choice of depressed middle-aged heroine, I didn't ever truly connect with Ista – not like I have done with Miles and Cordelia in her Vorkosigan books.

Paladin of Souls was good enough that I plan to finish the trilogy, but flawed enough that I'm feeling no great urgency to do so imminently.

** Update: I have now read book one, *The Curse of Chalion*, and it's solid gold.

Heather says

I love this book. I love Ista. I love her sense of humor, and I admire her strength and forbearance. I love watching her warm up and fill up over the course of the book.

I love how the worldbuilding is just so natural and easy, and how complete and interesting it is. I love the theology.

I love how she tackles the themes of redemption, grace, forgiveness, guilt, sin, failure, the relationships of gods with their creations, power and impotence, selfishness, aging, death and dying, finding a sense of purpose, pain, and destiny.

I love pretty much everything about this book. Granted, it takes about 100 pages for the action to really start, but once it does, it doesn't really let you go.

Bradley says

Even though this one is set in the same universe and there are crossover references and characters, this novel is quite different from *The Curse of Chalion*, in both situation, location, and MC's. Don't let that dissuade you, because this book kicks some serious butt. Literally, for there's even a WAR!

Enter Ista, the dowager mother, considered mad but really just god-ridden, bored and desiring a bit of action on the side. (Get your mind out of the gutter. Yes, she does have some romantic feels, on the side, but it's more the case of a woman on a mission of self-discovery, travel, and understanding.) And just because she becomes the Paladin of a God and becomes one of my most favorite female protagonists in fantasy literature, full of rounded personality, wry humor, natural desires and surprising reactions to what ought to be some horrific reveals, should never downplay the fact that when push comes to shove, she really knows how to kick ass. Need I say that the reveals and the novel's climax are amazing? Probably not. The novel is a widespread favorite of a lot of people and it won the Hugo in 2004.

Of course, she's not the only great character in the novel. I have to say I've grown quite fond of the Bastard. Liss has quite a personality, too. :)

I'm fascinated at just how much this novel does NOT feel like a pilgrimage of saints. Or how the portrayal of so much death does NOT feel strange or odd, but instead feels like a spur to great things. I was frankly amazed at feeling a great deal of awe at so many of the otherwise fantasy-normal events that were twisted on their sides to appear as something completely different than I'm used to.

I could just chalk that up to Bujold being Awesome Bujold, but I think it's something more than that. She manages to turn something that ought to be epic fantasy with battles and demons and mages with blood flying everywhere into something personal and revealing and surprising, and that isn't something that anyone should take lightly. It takes a brilliant writer to pull that off, and she's got the chops. :)

Beautiful novel. :)

mark monday says

the woman is not old, but blame the place and time, she is seen as such. the woman is not maternal, despite having given birth to a child she loves. the woman is not mentally unwell, but blame the past's taint on her present, she is seen as such. the woman seeks adventure and an opening for escape from the smothering life that those who love her would trap her in. she forces a door to open and so off she goes! smart, brave, emotional, critical, modest, kind, and eccentric... she's all the best things, yet flawed as well. my kind of woman.

and my kind of book! so thoughtful and carefully considered. an immersive experience from an emotionally intelligent, empathetic author who cares about her characters - and her readers. the prose of a high caliber craftsman, a deliberate pace, fascinating mysteries and puzzling conflicts that resonate on many levels. a satisfying ending. a pleasure to read from beginning to end.

my only complaint: that blasted book cover! it is beautiful, no doubt. but if an author isn't shy about having a middle-aged woman as their novel's protagonist, damn the artist (and publishers) assigned to this book who couldn't be bothered to do the same.

Kelly says

I was a really big fan of this when I started it. It's an aftermath story of a middle-aged woman, a Mother figure from a previous novel who has already lived through the fire and black magic that lead to the somewhat more typical fantasy-adventure of her daughter's coming of age, marrying the prince, producing an heir and living somewhat happily ever after. This woman, considered mad due to her previous involvement with gods and curses and magic, starts the book not even after those events close, but after the death of her dominating mother. She is suddenly alone, with no obligations or immediate threats to face for the first time in twenty years or more and asks a compelling question:

"Who am I, when the walls of my life no longer surround me?"

It drives her to run, to change, to Eat, Pray, Love it up high fantasy style. It's awesome at first watching her assert herself and build her own life and find out her strengths and her talents.

However, perhaps not unexpectedly, she discovers these talents through stumbling upon a A Situation that must be fixed, which only she can do. Unfortunately, this meant that we largely left the more interesting inner character development and exploration to watch her figure out the rules of magic and theology and demons, interspersed with battle sequences. This is her talent, so it makes sense, but I wish that Bujold had kept more of a balance between the way she started the book and the Quest that the rest of the book became. There were still a few affecting moments here and there, but on the whole the rest of the novel became a more typical sword and sorcery thing that I was far less interested in. It was cool, though, to see the hero of such a tale be a middle-aged, somewhat average looking woman, even if she did have super special powers and spoke to gods. That did seem to be somewhat the point, so well done, mission accomplished. You go girl!

It was an interesting experience to read how a typical fantasy hero might be different with twenty years more of experience, a life behind them, and, you know, being a woman, a mother, and one who had made a lot of mistakes and specifically NOT been a hero before. There were decisions that the heroine made that someone without those things would not have (her relationships with her love interest and his brother, her dealings with her former "keepers", and especially her dealings with the other female character with the most screen time). I wish we had spent more time on that aspect of things, though, rather than on the more typical action sequences, magical rules and world building that I could encounter elsewhere. Bujold created a cool thing here, I just wish she'd spent more time making the most out of it, rather than driving home the point of how much this thing is like the other.

In any case, an enjoyable read with an interesting premise that is pretty solidly written throughout. Just not as unique as I thought it would be at the start. Or maybe it's just that I have still only rarely encountered an action sequence that did not make my eyes glaze over if it lasted more than a few pages. That could be it, too. I'll take some of the blame for my less than stellar rating on this one.

Sherwood Smith says

I have to admit my partisanship right up front. I am a dedicated fan of the Miles Vorkosigan books and I loved *The Curse of Chalion*, which serves as a prequel to this book. Though *Paladin* stands quite well on its own.

The plot is fairly easily summed up: the Royina Ista, a middle-aged widow, decides to go on pilgrimage through the land of Chalion, which feels a lot like a Renaissance alternate-Spain, one that is overseen from the other-worldly realm by five gods, so there are five religious traditions going on here.

On the way she and the divine leading her entourage discover that demons have been appearing in the world with disturbing frequency, having escaped from the fifth god's hell. The pilgrimage is then waylaid by a lost contingent of Roknari warriors from the neighboring kingdom; she is rescued by a swashbuckling horseman who attacks a troop single-handedly. He is Arhys, march of Porifors, a border fortress that has seen far too much action of late.

Roknari, demons, and gods tangle up in fast action covering just a span of days, and Ista is squarely at the center.

What make the story so rich and readable are Bujold's strengths as a storyteller, here on confident display. Ista is, like Cordelia Naismith, a grouchy, funny, smart middle-aged heroine, not beautiful, but eminently lovable, even when she is angry and soul-parched and must rediscover love.

Besides Ista there are a pair of heroes who ought to please anyone who likes swashbuckling men, and a cast of subsidiary characters none of whom are mere spear carriers or cardboard Greek chorus, all reacting the same way in order to signal the reader what emotional reaction is required.

Bujold is not just a master of plot, she is a master of emotion.

"I think you left some hard turns out of your tale, too." But that last remark had the weight and density of a truth too large to be denied. How like a man, to change from mask to mask like a player, concealing all intention, yet leave his heart out on the table, carelessly, unregarded, for all to see.

The action is enriched, with grace and wit, by subtle characterization that suggests that middle-aged love can be sexy and romantic, can even be the more powerful because the attraction is backed by experience.

But the young characters are not overlooked. One of the most interesting and complex is Arhys' young wife, who is gorgeous, obsessively in love, and very self-centered. However she too is no one-note character. As the story unfolds, she reveals layers that make her fate impossible to predict.

One of Bujold's strengths is the generosity of spirit that gleams like a vein of gold through even the grimmest wars and immoral actions of the Vorkosigan saga. In the Chalion world, there is plenty of room for emotional conflict, and growth, for moral choice and its consequences.

What this fantasy series permits Bujold to explore, as the Barrayaran stories do in a very limited sense, is speculative religion. And she does it with verve and dash.

Ista swallowed, or tried to. And prayed, Ista-fashion: or made a prayer of rage, as some claimed to do of song or the work of their hands. So long as it was from the heart, the divines promised, the gods would hear. . I am not a child, or virgin, or modest wife, fearing to offend. No one owns my eyes now but me. If I have not the stomach by now to look upon any sight in the world, good or evil, beautiful or vile, when shall I? It is far too late for innocence.

The gods are not one-dimensional, predictable human analogues. Rare is the light-shaft of numinosity in fantasy these days, despite (maybe because of) vast powers being splashed back and forth across the megaverse by Eviol Mages and Goddess-blessed Sorceresses, but Bujold manages it in this novel.

"Your Father calls you to his Court. You need not pack; you go garbed in glory as you stand."

This series is generous with action, character, humor, terror, moral as well as physical conflict, emotional complexity, religious questing in the realm of the spirit—and redemption.

Choko says

*** 4 ***

A buddy read with the folks at FBR, because we love good Fantasy!

"...“The gods give no gifts without hooks embedded.”...”

For anyone who knows me, they must understand my love affair with the works of Lois McMaster Bujold. I am all about the characters who seem normal but are anything but... They are just enough off-center, that they become different than most leading characters we usually meet in both Sci-Fi and the Fantasy genres, despite their obvious to us, after we get to know them, heroic tendencies. They are never perfect, they are never miraculously healed and their happily ever afters are never the ones from our dreams. After you close the book we are aware that their lives do not just end at the back cover of the book, they keep going, making big mistakes and still having the core of Honor which makes them perceive and keep trying to be better, overcoming all the odds. Ms. Bujold writes about the underdog, but not such because of financial or origin circumstances - an underdog by the virtue of their emotional state and the way they see themselves. But she always writes about the regular person who does their best just to stay afloat and that makes them a hero at one point or another, just enough to inspire us to keep on wanting to do better...

"...“And the Bastard grant us... in our direst need, the smallest gifts: the nail of the horseshoe, the pin of the axle, the feather at the pivot point, the pebble at the mountain's peak, the kiss in despair, the one right word.”...”

The Fifth G-d, The Bastard, is the patron of all those who the other four regular, more prominent G-ds overlook and do not desire. He is the G-d of the lost souls, bastards, underachievers, and even demons. So, it is no wonder that when a seemingly random infestation of wayward demons is encountered on the border of Chalion and its ancient foe, The Bastard and his representatives must get involved. At the same time, a very bored, coddled and lonesome Dowager Royina Ista, in her forties and already put in her "chamber" to spend her days with over-protective, overly stuffy and nosy ladies in waiting, every day for the rest of her life!!! She lost her husband, her son, just recently her mother, and carried a part of a dark curse most of her adult life, while for a time she was g-d touched and was able to see the lost souls of the departed, no wonder people think she is insane and are afraid she will take her life, thus creating a gentle prison for her... For her safety, you understand... If she wasn't insane for real, this smothering treatment of her would eventually finish the job. Her souls aches for a breath of freedom and she concocts a pilgrimage to holy cites just so she can get out of the room she has been sentenced to. A young female courier, a group of soldiers and a Divine (priest) of the Bastard accompany her, which is a heck of a lot smaller entourage than her "jailers" wanted to bestow upon her. However, the land is still unsettled and the border region has seen some enemy raids, and maybe her smaller group is not as prudent as it should as far as protection is concerned...

"...“One learns better than to hand one's choices to fear. With age, with every wound and scar, one learns.”...”

So, our heroes get besieged, deal with demons, some maybe dead men, magic, and of course, the G-ds, most specifically, The Bastard. It is always trouble when the divine decide to involve you in their dealings. So our dowdy dowager finds the strength of spirit to deal with everything that comes her way, finding on the way

parts of herself she thought long lost. This is where LMB shines - the simplicity of the way she captures deep emotional feelings without making them angst and over-blowing the emotions we have gotten used to see overblown in other reads... She still finds a way, a very minimalistic and in that way very poignant way of making a deep emotional connection, delving into the soul just with a word, a nod or an act, but never with "prosaic fat"...

"...“It is imperfect. So are all things trapped in time. You are brilliant, nonetheless. How fortunate for Us that We thirst for glorious souls rather than faultless ones, or We should be parched indeed, and most lonely in Our perfect righteousness. Carry on imperfectly, shining Ista.”...”

Do I even need to say it now? Yes, I recommend this series to every fan of Fantasy and Ms. Bujold, but I think it would connect better with the more mature reader. After all, there is a sensibility that often comes with age, and only few of the luckier younglings get the pleasure to enjoy. As always, she brings deeply personal and spiritual questions, never giving you a right or wrong answer but leaving it up to us. We can never accuse LMB of being preachy:):)

"...“We are all of us, every one, our own works; we present our souls to our Patrons at the ends of our lives as an artisan presents the works of his hands.” ...”

Now I wish you all Happy Reading and may you always find what you need in the pages of a Good Book!!!

Michael says

A totally satisfying vision of a middle-aged woman driven down by past tragedy who takes up the heroic work of making the world safe from the dangers of enslavement of souls. The character of Ista captured my heart with her charm, wit, and courage, as she almost did for the hero Cazaril in the previous book, "Curse of Chalion" (2001). For this feudal world, Bujold invents a lovely blend of Christian dualism with a Roman-style pantheon of five gods, a system within which saints and demon-infested sorcerers square off over the fate of souls with opposing approaches for melding matter and spirit.

Ista, the mother of the current queen, dreams of escaping the emptiness of her protected life and settles on a fake pilgrimage. In the first pages, Bujold builds a pre-condition for her hero worthy of mythological themes identified by Joseph Campbell. Ista's stultifying life in a provincial capital is punctuated by a series of bubbling thoughts:

Who am I, when I am not surrounded by the walls of my life? When they have all fallen into dust and rubble.

...

I want a road that does not come back. ...

But how could she gain the road? Roads were made for young men, not middle-aged women. ...

I am an orphan now, though. Is that enough to qualify me? .

It was fun to see her put together an ideal escort, bullying her way past her official protectors to avoid a big retinue of attendants, soldiers, and a distinguished spiritual guide. In her mind she ponders, "What might pilgrimage be like if, instead of dragging a lot of tired guardians out on a road that suited their bones so ill, she could travel with people who laugh? Young people, not brought low by old sin and loss?" A small troop led by two dashing young brothers is enlisted from Cazaril's forces. A young, scholarly acolyte of the quirky Bastard god is tapped to be her religious guide. A young female courier who is masterful with horses is snapped up to be a combination personal courier and lady's maid.

Many dangers beset their party. She ends coming under the protection of the governing family of a province

besieged by marauding Rognari soldiers from a neighboring enemy kingdom. Among them are sorcerers who host demons within their souls. Her host family has a terrible dark secret of their own, which also involves demons. For survival, Ista is forced to learn to how to harness her own special talents in dealing with spiritual beings and in leading people toward effective action. A love story is buried in the rich and rewarding tale of second chances.

Bujold works a lot of poetic metaphors into the spiritual order of her world, as introduced early in the book through their priest's first sermon:

From the fire at the heart of the world slowly grew the World-Soul.

But the eye cannot see itself, not even the Eye of the World-Soul. So the World-Soul split into two, that it might so perceive itself; and so the mother and father came into being. And with that sweet perception, for the first time, love became possible in the heart of the World-Soul. Love was the first of the fruits that the realm of the spirit gifted back to the realm of the matter that was its fountain and foundation. But not the last, for song was next, then speech.

...In their first love for each other they bore the Daughter and the Son, and divided the seasons of the world among them, each with its special and particular beauty, each to his own lordship and stewardship. And in the harmony and security of this new composition, the matter of the world grew in boldness and complexity. And from its strivings to create beauty, plants and animals and men arose, for love had come into the fiery heart of the world, and matter sought to return gifts of spirit to the realm of spirit, as lovers exchange tokens."

...But the fire at the heart of the world also held forces of destruction that could not be denied. And from this chaos arose the demons, who broke out and invaded the world and preyed upon the fragile new souls growing there as a mountain wolf preys upon the lambs of the valleys.

While these four gods can only deal with the spiritual realm, the Bastard god is more Christ-like in its blend of matter and spirit:

And so was born the last god, the Bastard, love child of the goddess and the great-souled demon. ...their Son, of all the gods, was given agency over both spirit and matter, for He inherited as servants the demons that His father's great sacrifice had conquered and enslaved and so swept out of the world.

Despite my focus here, the spiritual system and magical elements involved in negotiating the bleeding edge of good and evil forces at play are not overwrought, as is often the case in classic fantasies like "The Lord of the Rings." The excitement of the teamwork as a band of "brothers" and creative problem solving during crises made this tale a compelling read for me.
