

Review of Horizon

Review of Horizon – Book Four of The Sharing Knife by Lois McMaster Bujold

This is prescribed reading for those of you who are familiar with Bujold's space-faring hero, Miles Vorkosigan, but haven't caught up with her fantasy offerings. And if you're a fantasy fan, who hasn't yet encountered this author – you're in for a treat. Which is easier said than done, if you happen to live in Britain. Inexplicably, The Sharing Knife fantasy series is unavailable here in the bookshops. Which speaks volumes about the dire state of the publishing industry in this country and the direction it's going in...

That said, if you want to get the best out of this book don't start with Horizon – get hold of the first three books. Although if that isn't possible, in Bujold's skilled hands you won't be too adrift. Near the start of this book is a nifty scene where the characters give a potted 'story so far', useful for those of us with Swiss-cheesed memories and yet not too annoyingly repetitive.

In a world where the remnants of ancient evil magic can erupt into life as malices and take control of any animals and people unfortunate enough to cross their paths, only the Lakewalkers are able to kill them. Secretive about their uncanny abilities, Lakewalkers regularly patrol looking for malice outbreaks. However, gruesome stories about their customs abound within the farming communities increasingly settling the land, leading to mutual distrust and hostility between the two groups. Which doesn't bode well for hard-bitten Lakewalker, Dag Redwing Hickory, when he finds himself in love with the young farmer's girl, Fawn Bluefield.

Although a romantic fantasy series that charts Dag and Fawn's relationship, the romance in the latter two books takes more of a back seat as Bujold explores the impact of their marriage on a divided society. Adventure and danger abound with plenty of pace, set within a more unusual fantasyscape that is loosely reminiscent of 1800's America. This is particularly striking with the scenes of the settlers searching for land with all their goods loaded on wagons. The malices are a satisfyingly creepy enemy and the world is peopled with interestingly complex characters.

But, in my opinion, Bujold's outstanding ability is her world-building. This master world-crafter pulls us into her imaginary society, complete with its inequalities and secrets, gradually unwrapping all this to our gaze through the viewpoints of her two main characters. It is a joy to read.

As with all the best fiction, this book operates on several levels. The story can be read as a straight adventure. Or the reader can be aware of the interrelationship between the two groups as the population inexorably grows – one semi-nomadic and inward-looking, another constantly pushing outwards in a constant quest for more land and possessions. Each book within the series tells a slice of the story and while Horizon successfully brings all the main plotlines to a satisfactory close, there is plenty of scope for more books in this world. Please, Lois...

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