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Sword of shadows series review

I first discovered the Books of Shadow Sword as a fifteen-year-old with an increasingly serious (and sometimes embarrassing) epic fantasy addiction. Jones's bleak and wintry landscapes attracted me from the beginning, not least because of the quality of his writing. Jones explores some of the traditional themes of fantasy fiction – including the moral ambiguity of all agendas, even those who profess to be saving the world from 'evil' – with an unusual degree of nuance and depth. But what made the series particularly compelling to me were its wives. The Sword of Shadows books are filled with complex female characters who are themselves decision makers, adventurers and potential role models - rather than just accessories for the personal journeys of their male counterparts. For years, this made me recommend books to friends as examples of fantasy that was, perhaps, a bit feminist. Over ten years on the track, I'm not so sure about that anymore. In her recently reissued work on feminism and science fiction – *In the Chinks of the World Machine* (2012) – Sarah LeFanu stated that mere inclusion of strong female characters is not enough to make a feminist book. This is definitely a waiver that I would apply to books of the sword of shadows. Whatever their strength at the character level, they are mostly established in a patriarchal and violent world in which men are the only visible subjects in history. To what extent, then, are these books even able to advance feminist writing in the fantasy genre? Do these books challenge gender stereotypes? Do these books portray the status of women in this world from a critical, potentially subversive angle, or portray it with a kind of nostalgia, glorify the exploits of male heroes and unshackle gender stereotypes? Spheres separated from humanity. In a cavern of black ice – the first book in the series – Jones introduces the reader to a classic high-fantasy scenario in which humanity stands on the brink of confrontation with forces so dark that they threaten existence itself. However, humanity in the series means different things to men and women. Much of the series is set in the 'clanhalls' – isolated, periodically combatant settlements where the lives of men and women remain predictable – and quite separate – paths predetermined by tradition. Men's positions in clans are determined by a combination of fighting prowess, various skills (such as hunting or the ability to guide clan religious observances) and sworn swearing. By promising their lives to the clan, men gain social standing and earn the right to participate in clan politics. Women, on the other hand, belong by default to the clans in which they are born or married. The everyday responsibilities and (officially at least) their identities are entirely linked to their status as maidens, wives, mothers and widows. Only a handful of supposedly exceptional women - round house matron Anwyn Bird, chief's widow Ganlow and Chief Raina Blackhail's wife - are considered to have due sufficient respect to even set foot inside the Great Home of the Blackhail Clan when men are within making leadership decisions. And even these women run the risk of being quickly put in their place if they dare to go beyond their limited dominance: feeding and clan clothes, and caring for the sick and the grieving. Life in medieval-style cities of books does not offer women any greater degree of freedom. The lack of a rigid social code leaves ordinary women vulnerable to the constant threat of violence, while their bodies are treated as marketable commodities and, if lucky, means of social advancement. Women of nobility, on the other hand, are routinely used as pawns to cement the political alliances of their male relatives. It is only in the lands of the Sull – an ancient race that they are not 'human' – that we see a society that is not fully organized along gender lines, in which women's ambitions and skills can play independently of men in their lives. Exceptional women still for all the restrictions imposed on women in these different scenarios, the books of Sword of Shadows are full of women who become exceptions in their own societies, because they do not conform to the gender roles imposed on them. Two women – Old Mother and Thora Lamb – ride to war with Robbin Dun Dhoone. Chella Gloyal is an expert archer who helps Raina Blackhail learn how to use the bow, while Magdalena Crouch is the best-known killer in the north. Two of the clans – Scarpe and Castlemilk – are led by female leaders, and among their renegade band Sull, Yiselle No-Knife has emerged as an ambitious leader. It is particularly refreshing to see a fantasy series where powerful women are able to want various things, not all nobles – advantages and protections for their clans, taking advantage of political struggles among their people, wealth – without at some point returning to stereotypical portrayals of femininity revealing motivations that are actually all about their personal relationships. Although Yelma Scarpe and Yiselle No-Knife are unequivocally characterized as villains, their purposes are never accomplished through seduction. Yelma, Yiselle and Wrayan Castlemilk are able to see the past and act against the interests of their immediate family. And none of these women act for this rancid motive that continues to be attributed in popular culture to women who behave cruelly or ruthlessly: to be rejected, mild or disappointed in love or sex by a man. The Sword of Shadows series emphasizes so many exceptions to the dominant roles available to women that these women become not so exceptional after all. However, the best examples of Jones's refusal to stereotyped representations of the women in her books are the two main female protagonists of the series: Ash March and Raina Blackhail. Like outcast clansman Raif Sevrane, Ash March distinguishes himself from others prophecies and powers that threaten to turn it into a weapon in the war against the endlords. However, even as she faces the horrible knowledge that the very issue of her body is capable of destroying the endlords, while the powers she can barely control have potential to release them, she decides she will protect herself and her unborn child ahead of any debt she may owe the Sulls, or anywhere else with their own agenda. In doing so, she resists pressure to sacrifice herself to a fate about which she has only snippets of information given to her by various male experts and guardians of knowledge. She chooses for herself the name Sull 'Mountain Born' – thus rewriting her own meanings about the history of her birth, again and again against the interpretation of this story in the prophecies and schemes of others. I like the fact that ash is no cardboard cut or action figure. She accepts her need to rely on the struggle and trekking experience of others, even as she makes efforts to master these skills for herself. He is also well aware. Although he shares a bond of loneliness and shared danger with Raif, he decides to leave him and become Sull, realizing that he must belong to more than just any man or savior. He is also able to act on his physical attraction to Lan Fallstar without confusing this attraction with romantic love. In this way, she circumvents the tendency of too many fantasy heroines to join the first person they could share an emotional or physical bond with, and remains refreshingly interested and independent throughout the series. Raina Blackhail is another character exploring what it might mean to claim one's identity on her journey to gain legitimacy as Blackhail's first female boss. Once happy to be defined as the aid partner of the former head of the clan, Dagro Blackhail, she comes to recognize that none of her marriages had managed to fully link her to her adopted clan. Rather, her lifelong commitment to the clan is cemented through the oath she makes about the fragments of Blackhail's broken guiding stone – the first oath we hear spoken about by a Hailswoman – and also at this tense but powerful time in the game room, when she tells Orwin Shank and Anwyn Bird that she will be boss. Raina's journey leads her to conflict with others – some of them women – who judge her to go out of the boundaries within which all hails women are expected to live their lives. At the same time, however, her journey depends heavily on the support networks and strengths of women such as Anwyn Bird, Merritt Ganlow and Chella Gloyal, who act as their advisers, mentors, unwilling accomplices and complicated allies throughout the books. I like the way Jones ever does the complex relationships between Raina and these women in essentialist terms; their ambitions, alliances and ideas about the good of the clan are too diverse to allow for a At the same time, Jones also avoids presenting us with the tired and offensive image of an exceptionally skilled woman climbing to the male-dominated peak despite and above the jealousy of the other, less exceptional, women around her. Walking around the round house raina's journey to become a boss is also significant because it takes us for a walk all levels of Blackhail's labyrinthine round house - and in the spaces where clan women live and work. The invisible work that delves into the workings of kingdoms, cities, fortresses and round houses seems almost under the notice of most epic fantasy novels , which focus on more recognizably heroic or at least political spaces. When the setting of these novels is patriarchal, they become the stories of men, in which women are invisible or somehow exceptional, more interesting, talented and adventurous than the rest. The Shadow Sword series is different. We see far more of the daily rituals and power struggles that happen in Blackhail's kitchen, warehouses, barn, barn and playroom than we do from the battlefield - where clans fight armed with arrows made in the depths of the Hailhouse by the round house matron, Anwyn Bird. And the story of the Lord dog's escape to the broken tower of the Dhoonewall is not told without mentioning the battle of Nan Culldays to make the tower alive for him and his men. By focusing on these spaces, Jones makes visible and important the physical and intellectual work done by women –exceptional or not-. She lets us know that the history of clans is being made not only on the battlefield and the throne room. It is also being done in the granaries, when the loyalty of agrarian women taking refuge in the round house first makes the prospect of being called 'boss' a reality for Raina. It is being done in the game room, when Raina unemployed announces to her audience of two that she will be boss. Writing Women and Others For All These Strengths, the Shadow Sword series also has its negative aspects. One thing I found particularly frustrating was Jones's insistence on coining the entire appearance of his female characters almost as soon as they were introduced. Chella Gloyal, for example, it is definitely not pretty, while Raif is instantly attracted to the beauty of Mallia Argola, if not her nonexistent personality.* Raina is also described for the first time in terms of her beauty by Raif, who, ironically, is aware that it is ridiculous to think of such a thing at a time when she is taking a step forward to investigate the facts behind the death of her husband and her companions Clans. It feels as if beauty is almost mandatory for mainstream female characters in Shadow Sword - especially when their sexuality is important to the story. In A Cavern of Black Ice, sixteen-year-old ash is repeatedly by herself and others as underdeveloped and unattractive. However, shortly before his first with Lan Fallstar, she reassesses herself as someone accustomed to the frank attention of men - someone who had been described even as beautiful. Surely only a beautiful woman could have been involved in the sex scenes that took place in Lan's wolfskin tent - scenes that are, in my opinion, pretty good precisely because Ash is her anxious subject, incurious but active - rather than the passive object of a man's sexual experience. Finally, books repeatedly normalize heterosexual monogamy , which, of itself, is not unusual for the genre. However, the absence of gay and bisexual characters in the series is exacerbated by the fact that the only exception – the 'half man' and sorceress Sarga Veys – is repeatedly positioned as ridiculous and unnatural, rejected by its own attraction to other men. Too deeply embedded in a macho world? The books of the sword of shadows are full of contradictions. Jones clearly tries to challenge some of the stereotypes that remain prevalent in the high fantasy genre , leading to some very interesting female characters whose various personal journeys lack a relationship with a man as their primary reference point. However, in other ways, Jones's writing seems to sink a little too deeply into the values and cultures he paints so vividly to create the world of the series. The limited place they offer women is not always treated in a critical enough way. Jones writes to the women in the history of the lands that make up the subject of her novels, only to write some of them back focusing on their physical appearance, or consigning them to groups of clan and clanwives maids, whose identities have no connection to anything they do or might be good at. It will be interesting to see where the series goes next, especially with the stories of Raina and Ash. We hope that Jones will continue to insist on the growing self-awareness and independence of these characters. More than that, however, I hope it will do more to equip all of its female characters with a greater diversity of roles and identities. Perhaps seeing more of the Sull will show us more of a society where women are individualized, rather than consigned to marriage groups based on status and will be allowed to be part of the fund. This would do more to make this series a feminist than a focus on a few exceptional women – no how strong or admirable it may be – they could ever achieve. * Although perhaps the next book in the series will reveal more about Mallia, who at this point is the only female character to exist only as a love interest and a means of joining maimed men. As Raif himself reflected in A Red Ice Sword... how was Mallia Argola not whole?

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