



Graceling

Kristin Cashore

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Katsa has been able to kill a man with her bare hands since she was eight—she's a Graceling, one of the rare people in her land born with an extreme skill. As niece of the king, she should be able to live a life of privilege, but Graced as she is with killing, she is forced to work as the king's thug.

She never expects to fall in love with beautiful Prince Po.

She never expects to learn the truth behind her Grace—or the terrible secret that lies hidden far away . . . a secret that could destroy all seven kingdoms with words alone.

With elegant, evocative prose and a cast of unforgettable characters, debut author Kristin Cashore creates a mesmerizing world, a death-defying adventure, and a heart-racing romance that will consume you, hold you captive, and leave you wanting more.

Graceling Details

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Author : Kristin Cashore

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From Reader Review Graceling for online ebook

Lily C says

Watch my review here:

<https://youtu.be/4h7n2qCWtIQ>

Cait • A Page with a View says

2.5 stars. Soooo I thought this was some kind of Hunger Games-type dystopian story about a girl who could kill with her touch for some reason and put off reading it because I wasn't huge on Shatter Me. BUT then this turned out to be full of castles and princes and everything I love so that was a fun surprise!

I'm extremely neutral about this book, though. There were a few elements I liked (mostly the castles and princes), but the worldbuilding was weak and the writing itself was really dull. I didn't particularly connect with anything throughout the slow plot, honestly. **It wasn't bad... it just kind of skimmed the surface of what it could've been.** Some better worldbuilding or character development would've helped a lot.

I think I've just read so many other books about girl assassins/killers at this point that I needed a unique element or stronger story. SOMETHING. I thought the Graceling aspect was kind of underused or boring (aside from how Katsa's eyes were two different colors). I wasn't that into the romance, either. The fact that his name was Po didn't help much...

I really wasn't big on Katsa, though. Her character was equally hard to pin down, yet annoying. Like there's a difference between being tough/badass and being straight up rude and she kind of missed the mark on that one. **Katsa's personality is mostly self-righteous aggression.** I mean, SHE HITS PO -- how is any of that ok?

And I wouldn't necessarily herald this book as being feminist like I've heard because Katsa doesn't really support or attempt to understand other women's choices. The underlying message in some parts is pretty black/white... like women either have power or give it up to a guy. There isn't a range of ways for women to be strong. (And it's fine that she doesn't want to marry, but if her independent identity actually hinges on not needing a guy, then it *still revolves around men...* just the lack thereof). Most of the story was just felt like a weird and poorly executed attempt to create a "strong" female MC.

So yeah, **this book brought absolutely nothing new to the table and was just very, very average and anticlimactic.** The best I can give it is a very neutral shrug... I didn't actively dislike it, but I'm not sure I'll check out the sequels.

Melissa ♥ Dog/Wolf Lover ♥ Martin says

Okay, so this was a re-read on audio and I thought it was really cool with the multiple narrators and music

and stuff. But sometimes one of the voices rubbed me the wrong way and the music went from fantasy to what sounded like western music. Lol. Maybe it was just me! I still loved the book though =)

I am in love with Katsa! She is an awesome inspiration for women warriors in a book. She kicks arse and takes names. I love the fact that she doesn't care anything about marriage or having kids. She's like my hero. I need a tshirt!!! I wish I had her Grace :)

The characters in the book are so wonderful, even the evil jerks are played out very well. I was so happy when Katsa met Po! Are they made for each other or what?! I don't like what happened to Po though :(

I have a special place in my heart for Oll, Raffin, Bann, Bitterblue and Helda. These are some wonderful characters with a great family/friendship.

Katsa isn't like normal women, well that's obvious, but she doesn't care about any of the every day things women care about. She even hates her long hair because it's in her way of doing what she's trying to do :)

Katsa is Randa's mercenary and her, Oll and Giddon go out to do his bidding, although it's Katsa that dishes out the pain. After some time she starts to get tired of doing this to people. You will have to read the book to see where that goes. Giddon is a good person, he just doesn't really understand Katsa and wants too much.

I enjoyed all of the fighting and sparring between Po and Katsa. I loved when she was in a real fight too :) Not very many, but they were the best. Then again, most people would walk or run away when they saw her coming anyway. She's that bad and scary ! :)

Did I mention Katsa has some cool eyes! A lot of the Gracelings have different eyes from everyone else, but Katsa has some beautiful ones.

I am so glad I finally got to read this book, it is sooooo awesome!

Tatiana says

Update 1/24/2012. I probably should already stop being surprised by the fact that every time I reread a book, I come up with something new to say (or feel) about it. Looks like my previous reading of Graceling caused a lengthy rant. Yeah, no such strong feelings this time.

This time, I was able to appreciate the writing more. It's lovely. I really love how it flows, how the sentences connect. This book stands the test of time. And it's great that it stirs so much discussion and, often, outrage.

But, but, but. On a personal level, I still disagree with some of Katsa's views. There is a paragraph in the middle of the novel that is especially jarring to my sensibilities.

If she took Po as her husband, she would be making promises about a future she couldn't yet see. For once she became his wife, she would be his forever. And, no matter how much freedom Po gave her, she would always know that it was a gift. Her freedom would be not be her own; it would be Po's to give or to withhold. That he never would withhold it made no difference. If it did not come from her, it was not really hers.

The way I see it, there is a fundamental flaw in Katsa's logic. This notion that marriage takes one's freedom, that once you unite with someone, your spouse controls you. This is not what I believe in.

I am leaving my previous review of the book too. At the moment, I don't feel as strongly about the issues I was so eager to target back then. But who knows what I will feel in a few years?

Previously

This is my second reading of "Graceling" and I found myself enjoying it probably even more than when I read it the first time. I am once again convinced that Cashore is a very talented writer with a great future ahead of her.

"Graceling" is Cashore's first novel and what a great debut it is! Now, having read her second book "Fire," I know that she is developing as a writer in many ways. This particular book is very imaginative, the idea of Graces is original (at least to me) and intriguing - I especially enjoy the fact that the Graces are never what they appear to be at first. They are complex and ever evolving. I also appreciate Cashore's writing style - it is simple, concise, but yet very descriptive and emotional.

What greatly frustrates me about Cashore's writing, and the main reason I find it impossible for myself to give her books 5 stars, is ultimate weakness of her heroines (both Katsa and Fire) and their strange and obsessive attitudes toward marriage and children.

(view spoiler)

I understand that this rant might seem like a petty nitpicking, but I guess I appreciate Cashore's writing too much to leave my personal feelings about this book unexpressed.

Reading challenge: #8

Penny says

Updated 04/01/14:

I happen to like books which feature kick-ass feminist heroines and are light on the romance so I should like this book, right?

Yeah, but I don't.

First of all, Katsa acts like a petulant little girl throughout the entire book, not some strong feminist poster woman. Katsa shows very little, if any, personal growth over the course of this novel. Also, I felt like the author spent too much time trying to sell us on the following ideas: femininity is an idea forced upon women by the patriarchy, men don't respect women, commitment ruins relationships, marriage is a tool of the devil, and so on.

Look, I understand that *some* women feel that way, and I'm completely cool with it. I'd be lying if I claimed that I've never thought some of the same things during my lifetime. That said, I hate how the author seems to be shoving very specific views down my throat instead of telling me a story that challenges me to think for myself.

This book is written in such a way that it makes me think Cashore, the author, is using her character, her story as a vehicle to voice her very strong opinions. Don't get me wrong, I don't necessarily have a problem with that sort of thing, it's just that this book is being touted as 'feminist' but I fail to see true feminism within the pages of this book. I mean, I guess you could consider it a version of feminism, but it's not very inclusionary. In fact, it's a very bigoted version of feminism.

Other than Katsa every other woman in this book is portrayed as weak and dumb. So basically unless you're an angry, dress-hating, man-hating woman with an aversion to commitment there is something wrong with you.

News Flash: femininity isn't anti-feminist. I'm sorry but it is possible for independent, intelligent and stable women to embrace femininity without losing credibility. And anyway, isn't that the point of the feminist movement? Gaining equality without having to act like 'one of the guys'? I mean, sure, you can reject femininity if you want, but don't go around assuming that those who are feminine are pathetic weakling losers who do nothing to help the cause.

It just so turns out *that* line of thought is backward and does nothing to advance the cause.

Also, Katsa's view of other women in the realm is quite condescending in that she never seems to consider how privileged she is compared to some of these other women. Katsa's lucky in that she has the ability to kill pretty much anyone she wants so it's not like she has to do a damn thing anyone tells her to do. Despite all the crap she *supposedly has to* put up with, Katsa has benefitted from an education and she's also afforded more freedoms than most women because someone else pays her bills. She doesn't have to milk the cows or churn butter or become a serving wench. She doesn't have to prostitute herself out in order to make ends meet.

Girlfriend needs to shut the hell up about all that because it's not like she's doing anything other than making a-hole observations. Katsa's not doing anything to change the way all women in the realm are treated, which is fine, it's her life, whatever. She just needs to quit it with the judgmental attitude toward others who can't afford to live or think the way she does.

I could have handled Katsa's aversion to having a relationship with Poe if she hadn't had any feelings for him, or if she knew she wasn't emotionally ready to make any sort of commitment. But no, Katsa's aversion

to commitment was built up do be some great personal strength of hers.

Yeah, because being in a loving, trusting, equal and committed relationship isn't a sign of strength. Strength can only be had by ~~loners who don't like to commit because doing so will supposedly lower their self-worth~~ ...ummm....I mean..."independent" people.

Also, it has to be said: The love scene grosses me out as much or more than the sex scene(s) in *Titanic* and/or *Avatar*. Some people just don't know how to write a love scene. James Cameron and Kristin Cashore are among that group.

One last thing: why is it that no one seems to have an issue with Katsa hitting Po, literally knocking him to the ground so hard that he bruises? All he did was voice his opinion, that's it. Had the tables been turned, had Po hit Katsa for voicing her opinion, you people would be unbelievably angry. I'm sure some of you would be burning Cashore in effigy.

Let's do a little more of this whole turning tables thing. Pretend that Katsa is actually a male character and Po is female. Okay, how much do you love this new topsy-turvy version of *Graceling*? Not very much, you say? Yeah, I thought so.

If you ask me Katsa is one of the least deserving protagonists. She's a violent, judgmental a-hole who shows little to no personal growth over the course of this entire book. I don't care if she had a difficult childhood, having a difficult childhood doesn't mean you have to go around inflicting the worst parts of yourself on others. Having a difficult childhood doesn't give you license to be an awful person.

Two stars because the concept was cool. Too bad it was poorly executed.

Kat Kennedy says

Graceling by Kristin Cashore follows in a burgeoning market for strong female characters.

Katsa is much like Katniss from The Hunger Games in her naive perception of the world, her coldness and tendency towards pragmatic practicality. She is similar to Xhex from the Black Dagger Brotherhood in her disgust of all things "feminine".

The story is well written, with engaging, fun characters. Katsa is fun to read about. The plot may be a little predictable at times but it did throw me a curve ball toward the end.

The romance is lovely between Katsa and Po.

I take exception though, to the message that this book sends. It is the same message I am reading over and

over again in current literature.

From Bella Swan who looks down on girls who like shopping, to Xhex who must be wrestled into a dress and who sees all signs of emotion as feminine weakness and now Katsa who refuses to marry or have children and who despises dresses and long hair.

Message to authors: It is not nice dresses and pretty hair and an ability to be weepy on occasion that is the cause for the many inequality issues that women face. Putting a woman in pants does not change how the world perceives her. It doesn't suddenly make her stronger and better than the woman in the dress who likes jewelery!

Your character does not suddenly become the beacon of the feminist movement because she doesn't like dresses. So sick of reading about "strong, independent female characters" who don't like dresses and spend most of the novel putting down almost every other female character as weak and pathetic.

Miranda Reads says

Authors, take note: **This is YA Lit done right.**

Katsa is a monster. She's been one ever since she discovered the power of her killing Grace. Only...she starts to wonder, does she have to be?

When a monster stopped behaving like a monster, did it stop being a monster? Did it become something else?

In the Graceling Realm, those born with heterochromia (different colored eyes) also have a Grace. A **Grace can be anything** from the mundane (i.e. holding your breath indefinitely) to the cruel (i.e. mind control).

Katsa has been "blessed" with a **killing grace**. A Graceling born into her kingdom is automatically offered to the King (her uncle). Under his thumb, she **murdered, tortured and struck horror** across his lands and the seven kingdoms.

However, as she grew older, she became less comfortable in her own skin. So, she formed an alliance with sympathizers and started **moonlighting as a hero**.

When a mysterious prince - one with a silver eye and a gold eye and graced with fighting - visits to her kingdom, she finds herself questioning everything she's ever done.

First off - abso-freaking-lutely loved this premise. The powers, the squabbling kingdoms, the atmosphere. YES.

Mercy was more frightening than murder, because it was harder.

Second off - I loved Katsa's strength. She's far stronger than any man in the kingdom - but the writing and the characterization is done so well that she never dips a toe into Mary Sue territory nor does she get thrown into the self-sacrificing-woe-is-me category. **She's a badass who's earned her credentials.** And, I adore her sass:

Perhaps I can stay by the fire and mend your socks and scream if I hear any strange noises.

Third off - I loved the love. There was no falling in love at first sight, no shoe-horned love triangle and NO weird YA boy smells. I adored all the sweet moments between Katsa and her beau (Po) and I will defend their love to my dying day. They have such a **stable, healthy relationship** (something that is woefully in short supply in YA).

Katsa sat in the darkness of the Sunderan forest and understood three truths. She loved Po. She wanted Po. And she could never be anyone's but her own.

If you are in the mood for **quality YA lit** - pick this series up. You won't regret it. This is my fourth read through and I loved it as much as the first.

The 2018 PopSugar Reading Challenge - A book about a villian or antihero

Audiobook Comments

Holy mother of pearl. Full cast audio production - each character had a different actor/actress, there was music between chapters AND the kid voices sounded really realistic. An absolute pleasure to listen to.

[Blog](#) | [Instagram](#)

Rhea says

What I think about when I hear the name...

Po:

- Po the Panda
- Po from Teletubbies
- A crazy guy (like Edgar Allan Poe)
- Poo

Katsa:

- Ketchup
- Mutant Katniss

Ror:

- Roar! I'm a T-Rex!

Tealiff:

- Tea Leaf

Skye:

- Skype
- A modern name, which you will NOT find in a medieval place.

King Randa:

- Ranting + Panda. King Ranting Panda!

Drowden:

- Drowsy
- Drowning

Thigpen

- Pig pen
- Thinking pen

Leck

- Lick
- Peck
- Neck
- Smack
- Some other variation

Lienid:

- An insult. ("Hey, you *Lienid!*")

By the way, Po's real name is Greening Grandemalion. Great, at least it's not *Yellowing* Grandemalion or *Purpling* Grandemalion or something stupid like that. That would sound really weird, unlike Greening Grandemalion, which is a name someone would normally give to their child. Yeah...

If you have any more suggestions about what the names from *Graceling* sound like, feel free to put it in the comments!

Note: Next up is the review, which is very thorough about the issues of *Graceling*'s worldbuilding. This is going to take a while, but stay with me. Thanks.

Actual Rating: 2.5 stars

When reviewers criticize *Graceling*, they often complain about the view on feminism. I think enough has been said about that, so for detailed reviews about that issue, I recommend Amanda's review and Tatiana's review.

However, this isn't *Graceling*'s only flaw. The other big problem is the black-and-white world-building.

World of *Graceling*

Graceling is set in a European-ish medieval land with horses, taverns, kings, castles, and anything else you would expect to find in such a place. The land is divided into seven kingdoms: Lienid (the island kingdom), Monsea (a kingdom closed off by the mountains), Middluns (the middle kingdom), and Nander, Estill, Sunder, Wester, which surround Middluns on the North, East, South, and West side, respectively. (See what Cashore did there?) Another aspect is the Graced; some people are born with special abilities called "Graces"

such as mind-reading, excellent swimming skills, killing, etc. There is great prejudice against the Graced (except in Lienid) and one can tell if another person is Graced if the person's eyes are mismatched colors. (Random comment: One of my friends has eyes like this. It's a condition called heterochromia iridum. But sadly, my friend has no superpowers. :() Anyways...

I think we can all agree that European medieval worlds are definitely overdone; nearly every epic fantasy or high fantasy is set in one! However, authors can still make them fresh if they add complexity to them with new aspects or intriguing history.

Examples of Fresh, Intriguing Worlds

For example, in Cinda Williams Chima's Seven Realms, the generic fantasy world is made fresh by complex struggles between Gray Wolf Queens, Clan, and Wizards. There is a well-developed and unique culture in the world, stemming from the struggles between Clan and Wizards, and the history is complex and believable.

Another example is The Well Between the Worlds. It is a retelling of the King Arthur tale, set in a medieval world, but adds the elements of the Wells, the sinking of Lyonesse, and industrialization to make a breathtakingly fresh and original world.

So, what's the matter with *Graceling*'s world?

Why *Graceling*'s World-building Simply Isn't Good Enough

First off, there are only a few fresh aspects of this world:

- 1.) The idea of the Graced
- 2.) Some cultural aspects of the Lienid (like the gold jewelry, Po's tattoos, and the ring/inheritance thing).

...and that's pretty much it.

But there's got to be more! Anything! Tell me, **is there...**

A religion? No.

History? (Like references to why the kingdoms are how they are, etc?) Nope.

Mythology/legends/stories about old heroes, Graced, etc.? No.

Unique cultural aspects? None.

Anything that separates the world of Graceling from other fantasies? I'm sorry, but there is, other than the Graced, nothing original here.

Okay, okay, we get it! Nothing new here! But sometimes, generic fantasy worlds are complex. There are complex issues, complex characters, and complex motivations which make up for the lack of originality. In fact, a world lacking new ideas sometimes portrays old ideas in a new light! What about Graceling? Is there

any complexity?

Lack of complexity in Graceling

Part One: The Inhabitants of the world

EEEEEEVIL PEOPLE:

- The villain, (view spoiler) Why is he evil? Because he is! What does he do? Torture animals! He even (view spoiler) He is so EEEEEVIL!
- King Randa. Poor Katsa! Her EEEEEEVIL uncle is making her kill people! Does he feel the slightest guilt or remorse? No! Does he have a good reason for this? Yes, so he can be even *more* powerful!
MWAHAHAHAHA!
- Those other kings! (Except for King Ror, who is good.) They are always squabbling over borders and killing poor peasants and stuff. How horrible of them! They are so EEEEEVIL! And one of them even (view spoiler)

MEAN people

- Basically, everyone non-Graced. They just don't understand what it's like! Now that I think about it, all of Katsa's friends are either Graced or have a family member who is Graced (or are Lienid). The only exception is Oll.
- Giddon. He is so condescending! And he doesn't understand Katsa! And he's so stupid, he thinks he can protect her! Even when she can kick his ass! This portrayal bugs me, because it feels like a gimmick to show how good Katsa is, and how she deserves a good man in her life, and blah blah blah.

GOOD PEOPLE

- Katsa is forced to kill people by her uncle. But wait, she is really good! Don't believe me? She created an organization called The Council, which does nice stuff! She is so angelic! Admittedly, Cashore did give her a few personality flaws, but not enough. I mean, when you can kill an entire army without even a sword, wouldn't you be extremely selfish and extremely spoiled? I admit, I would be.
- Po. He is SOOOO noble! He still loves Katsa even if (view spoiler) And his secret is OK. Yes, Katsa is mad, but he is SOOOOOOO nice she doesn't care.
- Lienid people! They are so nice to the Graced! They respect them 'n stuff.
- Everyone not in the MEAN or EEEEEVIL section. They are brave, noble, etc. No one is ever a mixture of good and evil.

Part Two: The World Itself

The world of *Graceling* lacks nuance. When you look at the history of Europe, there are ancient alliances, complex relations, etc. between the countries. Not to mention, the citizens of each country see themselves in one way and see people from other countries in other ways. There are stereotypes, symbols, legends, and histories that may or may not be real. (And not just in Europe, everywhere.)

I was expecting well-developed relations between the kingdoms and between normal people and Graced people. I mean, Katsa and Po have to travel across many countries and I wanted to see them struggle against

prejudices and stereotypes.

However, they had had it extremely easy. Here is the extent to which all the relationships were developed:

- Normal people hate the Graced! (For no apparent reason) All you see is a strong dislike, no complex feelings. (For example, being in awe of their powers, yet feeling jealous)
- Kingdoms fight over borders. That is pretty much it. Their only dislike comes from border squabbles.

And... that's about it.

Anyways, reading *Graceling* was an underwhelming experience. I mean, the first time I read it, I was in middle school, and even then I was disappointed!

Recommendations: Many people loved this book. You might too, if you:

- 1.) Love a good kick-ass heroine
- 2.) Are looking for a fun adventure
- 3.) Want lots of action in your fantasy
- 4.) Love reading about kind, noble men in love with misfit girls

But you might not if you:

- 1.) Are looking for a deep exploration of feminist ideas
- 2.) Require complex, original world-building
- 3.) Need complex characters
- 4.) Want a complex plot

Final Comment: *Graceling* isn't a bad book. For me it was 2.5 stars (2.5 = a little more enjoyable than "meh") There is some decent character development, some exciting action, and a somewhat original plot. Also, other than the overwrought feminism, *Graceling* doesn't have any big flaws that might insult the reader and completely ruin the reading experience. There was also some humor and some quotable moments, my favorite being,

"When a monster stopped behaving like a monster, did it stop being a monster? Did it become something else?"

during a moment of poignant character introspection. (Speaking of that, there were some great ideas concerning what it means to be a monster.) All of this made *Graceling* an OK book. However, *Graceling* feels like an edited draft - there are good ideas, good editing, but nothing is really fleshed out. Let's hope in future books, Cashore spends more time on her story.

Alternatives:

- For a complex fantasy, Seven Realms is an terrific four-book series. Book 1 (The Demon King) is mostly a set-up book, with fantastic world-building, but familiar (and somewhat cliche) characters. Book 2 (The Exiled Queen) is great; the characters deepen, and the plot thickens. Book 3 (The Gray Wolf Throne) is absolutely stunning; intricate plotlines come perfectly together, characterization is amazing, and the tension

is almost unbearable. And Book 4 (The Crimson Crown) is the kind of book so jaw-droppingly amazing, you feel like crying just because the book ENDED.

- For a (urban-ish) fantasy/Para-Normal Romance, (don't worry, there romance isn't annoying]) with a totally kick-ass heroine, original world-building, and gorgeous prose, check out Daughter of Smoke and Bone by Laini Taylor.

- For a short, rich fantasy (that won the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award) with a strong heroine who is selfish (but gets better) and has a coming-of-age story, I recommend Franny Billingsley's The Folk Keeper. There is also an exciting mystery (with more than one twist), and just the tiniest dash of romance. Plus, as a bonus, the prose is lovely.

- I've heard that the *The Queen's Thief* series by Megan Whalen Turner are fantastic, especially those after book 1 (The Thief.) I admit, I have not read them yet, but book 1 won the Newberry Honor medal, and many "picky" reviewers say they are fantastic.

- The Well Between the Worlds by Sam Llewelyn is also a terrific, original novel. Yes, it is a children's book (ages 10+) but so was *His Dark Materials*. And just like His Dark Materials, TWBTW is sophisticated, well-written, and a lot of fun. And isn't it said that a good children's book can be enjoyed by adults as well?

Anyways, I hope this review helps anyone thinking about whether or not they should read *Graceling*.

Random: Those of you not familiar with the Teletubbies theme song, this might seem weird. But I hope you can sympathize with my frustration with the *Graceling* names.

So, here is a parody:

(view spoiler) Parody

Emily May says

First thing I need to point out is that I consider myself a feminist, even as far as to take an active role in such matters. Previously, I have written articles on Feministing and I honestly think so many of these issues are still very important in today's world. However you look at it, the battle for equality has not been won and has, in fact, become rather dormant.

On that note, I love reading fiction by feminist writers, Atwood never fails to deliver and The Handmaid's Tale is one of my favourite books of all time. Similarly with Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, except Woolf's writing can make you want to slit your wrists at times. The point of me saying this is that when I heard Graceling called 'feminist propaganda', rather than being repelled, I was intrigued. I love modern stories with strong heroines who can stand up for themselves and don't need to wait for prince charming to swoop in and save them. Katsa fit this in many ways, true, but I have so many issues with the feminist ideals in this novel that I don't know where to begin.

I am constantly faced with the irritating irony of radical feminists. The irony being that their favourite passtime is telling women what to do. Real feminism (as in the one that actually cares about women) is about choice, not about having to follow strict guidelines in order to banish the image of femininity. It's people like Kristin Cashore who make the term 'feminism' seem like a dirty word. Being strong and capable of making your own decisions is one thing... but the extremes of having to prove that you don't care about your looks or refusing to wear a dress is ridiculous. I wear dresses, I wear make-up, I like to make the effort to look nice... but in Cashore's world that means I'm a weak, pathetic wannabe-housewife.

For me, the main mistake that Cashore makes is to assume that anything 'girly' is bad. It's an ongoing debate about women and feminism. For example, take the stereotype that women are more emotional and are therefore more weak than men. The argument is: Is this wrong and women are not more emotional? Or does what's wrong lie in the idea that emotions are a weakness because they are a feminine trait? Radical feminism continues to try and spit on traditional aspects of what it means to be feminine. Of course, it is arguable that the idea of 'feminine' is created through socialisation (e.g. dressing babies in either pink or blue depending on gender), but it has long been my opinion that if you take the colour pink (a worldwide symbol of the female gender) and make it into something that should be disgusting, then that's about as anti-woman as you can get.

Margaret Atwood understood the dangers of radicalism and wrote the novel to go with it. In the same way that extreme socialism becomes the mirror of totalitarianism, radical feminism begins to mirror sexism. And that's why I had issues with a great deal of Graceling.

But... what I did like was the love story between Katsa and Po, once Katsa got over the idea that he would somehow take possession of her after sex. Po was a sweetheart and an all-round likeable character. And, don't get me wrong, I never really disliked Katsa because the fact that she refuses to wear a dress and doesn't want children is entirely her choice and that's what's important. I liked her strength and at many times I felt her frustration... particularly with regards to the girls throughout the kingdoms who were never taught to protect themselves because their fathers and brothers were expected to do it. I completely agree with the idea that the girls should have been taught self-defence and self-sufficiency.

The whole backdrop of magical kingdoms and whatnot was alright. It fit nicely around the main characters but I found the love story to hold most of my attention and that's why I've decided that I don't want to read Fire. The reviews of it tell me that romance comes far behind the whole fantasy aspect and I still have Tolkien nightmares. Yeah so, not a bad story but so many things disagreed with what I stand for.

Miss Clark says

I wanted so badly to like this book. It has so much going for it. It is original and inventive. I never once caught myself thinking, "Now, where did I read that before? Oh, right, in the last three books!" The idea of

the graced, their skills and their mismatched eyes; of the seven kingdoms; of the characters themselves. All of them were uniquely Cashore's own. Her prose was clear and lucid, though there were passages that dragged and made me want to skip ahead. So, pacing was occasionally a problem, but not the actual words themselves. I thought it quite notable, especially as a debut.

However. Yes, that dreaded however.

But before we get to that, a quick disclaimer. I certainly have no say on what Cashore did or did not intend the book to say. I only can say with certainty what *I* find in the book and I hope you can agree that if, in addition to great writing and engaging stories, one desires one's reading material to have at the very least some simple ethics, it is more than reasonable that some readers will discuss and debate the ethics and social mores that certain features of this book present. Personally, I appreciate being able to discuss something that a book mentions and which allows me to think of it in an entirely different light.

I am fully aware that many might feel that this review is biased and unfair, written from a narrow-minded, hidebound mentality. How dare I allow my personal convictions to color my view of a book I read? Especially a fantasy book that clearly takes place in a world that is not this one. But before you comment to let me know that I am a horrible disgrace and disappointment as a human for allowing my personal convictions to color my view of a book that I have read, please take a moment to know that I am not allowing any comments on this review. I had nearly 50 comments on this review and I ultimately chose to delete them when the vitriolic, contemptuous comments kept coming. For those of you whose opinions differed, but who chose to share that contrary opinion with civility and tolerance, I would like once more to extend my sincerest thanks, especially to Ariel and Angie. For the others that commented to agree or say thanks for the review, I hope it helped.

So, back to that however. My issue is that firstly, what Po and Katsa have is not love. Infatuation? Certainly. Affection? Sure. But love, "true love," is wanting what is best for the other person and doing whatever one can so that the other is able to move toward the best. Thus, love is at its core sacrificial and giving. What is the purpose of Katsa's and Po's sexual relationship? It is of transient emotional and physical benefit, but how does it benefit them ultimately? I don't believe that love equals sex, and the book seemed to infer just that.

But say she did love him. I'm all for girl power and females don't need a guy to be fulfilled. All for that. I even understand that at that point in Katsa's life she had just claimed her freedom and could not imagine entering any other station of life that would in any way limit or curtail her personal liberty. All well and fine. But then she goes ahead and enters into a physical relationship with a guy because she "loves" him, but just can't ever be "married" to him because that would limit her sense of self and her own freedom to come and go as she pleased. Granted, the concept of marriage within the confines of that secondary world might differ, it could be a total abnegation of self, but I never got that sense when they talked about marriages in their society. In fact, at its core, marriage (in our world) is a contract of personal commitment between two people, but Katsa, while perhaps legitimately shunning marriage in her world, still has no desire to ever commit to Po in *any* way. So it would seem that Katsa's issues had way more to do with herself and her own flaws and insecurities than the idea of commitment or even Po. Given his affection for her, he would never have limited her freedom. But flip the coin. What if it was Po who "loved" Katsa, but refused to marry her because then he would not be free? Where he was the one who would take whatever Katsa had to offer, but did not care enough to actually make any sort of commitment to her? That likely would not go over as well. It is strange what a double standard we have in relationships, esp. in a "feminist" age. We praise novels that show females as strong, independent individuals, even if that means they are also selfish and controlling, while we quite rightly condemn that sort of behavior in male protagonists. But then not only are we giving a

sad view of a "strong" woman, as if that is the only way to portray a vibrant and intelligent female, we are also touting a weak and ineffective masculine image that indicates that no male can be resourceful or a leader or else he is preventing the girl from being who she ought to be free to be...etc. When we did we stop striving for an ideal where both men and women complimented each other, each being allowed their own strengths, and being equals rather than always rivals and competitors?

So, again, a talented new author, but I have deep reservations about some of the messages in this book and I doubt I will recommend it to many people. Which is a shame considering the quality of the rest of the story, which is easily three stars for the prose, though the plot had a few spots that seemed out of place.

Graceling never seemed like it should have been a love story (much less a hook-up), and I was loving it as a fine fantasy/ personal growth novel, but once they brought in the romantic/ anti-romantic elements, it lost me.

Kaylin (The Re-Read Queen) says

4 Stars

Overview:

"When a monster stopped behaving like a monster, did it stop being a monster? Did it become something else?"

I honestly didn't know anything about this, but I'd seen it around and finally it was recommended enough. I was really surprised by the *depth* of this story and the characters.

The story revolves around Katsa, who lives in a world where people can be born with a 'Grace.' Meaning, aside from two-different eye colors, they have an exceptional skill. Katsa's grace is killing, for which she has served as a sort of 'thug' for her king.

Pros:

Can I just say how much I loved Po? He was such a strong, dynamic character. I really appreciated that he wasn't weakened to further enunciate Katsa's power—he's just strong in different ways.

(I'm also kind of in love with him)

This is slow-burn done right. The romance didn't spin in needless circles, but developed naturally as the characters interacted with each other more.

Overall, the plot was exceptionally creative. The world-building was handled with care and I really could picture these lands.

The villain was terrifying and well-set-up. Their skill is especially interesting and terrifying to me, and I found myself wanting more of their backstory.

There's a really *fantastic* discussion regarding romantic relationships and compromising one's self. I love how *incredibly* healthy I found this romance. There's marked discussion about the differences between training/fighting and striking out in anger (which is *not* seen as okay). I love how Katsa starts this novel not wanting children (she doesn't hate them—she just doesn't want to be a mother) or to marry, and this decision remains the same despite falling in love.

Really, it's not often for a positive portrayal of a woman who doesn't want kids and/or views marriage as a social contract (which is even more pronounced in this world) and I *really* appreciated this.

Katsa's overall character arc is gradual but definite. Her development was handled exceptionally, and she really ends this book changed completely.

Cons:

I had a few issues with the pacing—namely the climax seems a surprise, and there's a lot of time spent talking afterwards.

Giddon seems to exist to represent a sort of benevolent sexism. I really appreciated the way this was portrayed, and his words to Katsa are certainly something several modern women are familiar with:

"You're not an unnatural woman, Katsa. [...] You'll want babies. I'm certain of it."

What I didn't like about Giddon was how *random* his feelings for Katsa seemed. She seems the exact opposite of the tradition he favors and nothing like a woman he would want running his household. I wish this had been expanded upon or given more depth, because it felt like this plot existed *only* to fit in such quotes.

I didn't quite like how Po gave Katsa permission to "knock him out" when she needed time to herself, but do think he was an important decision for her to make regarding her development.

Most of the criticism I see for this seems to revolve around it being "feminist propaganda." ~~Which I find a little ridiculous~~ I think the complaints are mostly about how powerful Katsa is—and I will admit she does border on being really over powered. But I found her emotions more flawed and complex, and her overall arc much more fascinating.

My main problem is that Katsa seems to be the *only* portrayal of a 'strong' woman in the story. I don't have a problem with a woman refusing dresses and long hair and conforming to more typically 'masculine' standards, but I had wish it was better expressed this isn't the *only* depiction of a strong woman. There are other females characters, like Bitterblue and Helda, but they don't have near as much impact or depth.

In Conclusion:

This was a surprisingly introspective fantasy with interesting characters and worlds! I was really surprised by

the *depth* of this book and the intelligence of the writing, though I had a few minor issues.

karen says

it is so hard to write reviews for books i actually like. no, *love*.

talking about this book is like trying to describe to someone a relationship from long ago that was bittersweet and is now over, but i have never had a relationship that involved so many horses and swordplay, not even metaphorically. and fewer people care about my love life than about this book.

(i see you ariel - you are glowering at me with tiny slitted eyes)

but this book *is* like a wonderfully sweet relationship. at the beginning, you can't even imagine how you ever got along without it. and your friends (ariel) try to talk you out of it "oh, don't get with that guy, he gave me herpes" or whatever... but at the beginning everything was shiny and magical and when things started to go a little bit awry, i wrote it off as a glitch - a bad day that didn't necessarily mean that we weren't super awesome soulmates.

(because it's true - the "girl time in the mountain" sequence was the weakest, but i really thought the book rebounded to perfection afterward. we can forgive one drunken dalliance, can't we? one lapse in judgment?? what happens n *graceling* stays in *graceling*? yes?)

i just loved so much about this book - i never *ever* get invested in the love story side plots of these teen fiction books - i have yet to be on a "team". but this time, i fully believed in their attraction, and i really wanted these crazy kids to get together and kick ass together forever. their fighting scenes, when they were fighting each other, were hugely erotic, and for once the male lead seemed *worthy* in a way that others have not been. their shyness, their tenderness.... i found it very sweet. and if i was a crying type of girl, i would definitely have cried at this one.

so i am seriously bummed that the sequel is about the early life and times of king lamewad and not about anyone i actually cared about. but i will probably read it anyway, completist that i am.

and eventually, because i think i have largely abandoned this metaphor, and it is very important to follow through, even though there were bumps in the road and people got hurt and friends were less free with advice in the future, the experience was a generally positive one, and the memory lives on as an Important Time where everything seemed possible. even liking a book ariel said was bad...

come to my blog!

Krystle says

Graceling has a beautiful cover, great premise, and lots of hype, and would be a terrific novel if it weren't for the terrible writing and atrocious main character.

What is with the awkward sentence structures and prose in this book? "In these dungeons the darkness was

complete, but Katsa had a map in her mind." It should be "In these dungeons, the darkness was complete, but Katsa had a map in her mind." And look at the next sentence: "One that had so far proven to be correct, as Oll's maps tended to do." What? That made absolutely no sense. Instead: "One that had so far proven to be correct, as Oll's maps tended to be." Wouldn't that be better?

Then later on... "Turning when it was time to turn..." What? Isn't that redundant? And: "She began to hear voices as she entered a corridor where the darkness flickered orange with the light of a torch set in the wall." Dude, darkness does not flicker orange, if it did then that would not make it dark. And it's not with the light of a torch, but light from a torch. That whole sentence is just full of awkward phrasing and clunky description.

And the next: "Katsa crept toward the light and the sound of laughter." How can she creep toward laughter when it wasn't even introduced earlier? It just does not get any better. And later on, she pulls her hood down over her eyes. What the hell. How do you expect to fight if you can't see where the heck you're going or what you're doing. It's not a surprise she trips over the four guards because OBVIOUSLY, you can't see anything! Why does she need to pull her hood down to hide her eyes when the guard she fights later ALREADY KNOWS WHAT SHE IS? Okay, that's it. I'm done.

But the biggest offense of the book was the main character.

Katsa is the most annoying, aggravating, self-centered, abusive, and violent character I've ever had the misfortune to read from the eyes from. I thought Bella was tops (in annoying meter ranking), but Katsa wins the prize. During the book there were many instances where I wished I could rip her hair out and run her through with her own sword.

She is the biggest Mary Sue I've ever seen published. It wasn't so bad that she was Graced with some special ability but hers was off the wall unbelievable that I couldn't give her any sort of realistic credibility at all. Not only can she kill anyone with her bare hands, she's faster than anyone, builds fire better than anyone, hunts better than anyone, shoots and fires arrows better than anyone, yet she doesn't suffer from the freezing cold as the rest of her comrades - it just slows her down when other normal people would be down on the ground dying from hypothermia. She doesn't even tire like the rest of them because she just has unending bundles of stamina. So much so that she can go for days without sleeping even though they were in some pretty gruesome and difficult battles... And the list goes on. I mean what can Ms. Perfect not do? And don't give me that crap about how it's logical because of her special grace. There's a special balance between believable and ridiculous, and I'm sorry, but this is way over into the ridiculous area.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Katsa's most unredeemable factor was her attitude.

No one can tell her to do anything she doesn't want to do even if it's for the wiser. And if she doesn't like what she hears, her first reaction is anger, and then she throws a tantrum until she gets her way. But yet, every situation she finds unappealing to her, the first thought that comes to mind is violence. I clearly remember a scene where Po told her his opinion which wasn't demeaning, cruel, or hurtful at all, and you know what she does? Hits him so hard he falls off his chair and has a wicked bruise. W-T-F. And not only that, her characterization is inconsistent. She's supposed to be this bad ass chick who takes no crap from anyone and doesn't need a man in her life to define her but as soon as Po enters and tells her he's going to leave she cries tears because she "doesn't know why"? What the hell kind of crap is this? And what is her utter revulsion to marriage? I mean, I don't want to get married as well but Katsa's reasoning behind this is not concrete or sufficient enough to support her viewpoint that she vehemently defends many times throughout the book.

I was absolutely disgusted, ***disgusted***, by the way she treated her horses. She treats them as a way to serve her own self-satisfying needs without care. The first instance that stuck me was when Po and Katsa were riding off somewhere and she slammed her horse against Po's because she wanted to get his attention. W-T-F! Not only is that dangerous to the rider because they could fall off, but it's dangerous to the horse! Slamming into another horse while you're riding is NOT something you do. The horse could have fallen because the impact threw him off balance, and you're obviously not going to walk away from that injury free, or it could have tripped and then fallen. Not to mention she ALWAYS pushes her horses to ride fast because she has no patience and wants to get there faster, and if someone tells her they needed to rest the horses or they'll break them, she just throws hissy fits about how they have to hurry and they're just slowing her down. Horses are not machines, good god! They're living, breathing animals that need care just like we do!

The next one was near the end of the book where she pushed everyone so hard, and rode for hours at a blistering gallop just so they could reach their destination faster. And then I clearly remember someone, Skye, I believe it was telling her that she lamed a horse. And you know what Katsa's response to this was? "Oh, he's not lame! He's perfectly fine" and then throws a fit about how he's slowing them down and they need to get up and ride him harder so they can get to their destination faster. OMFG! I almost threw the book across the room in rage.

The place names were very uncreative. You might think they're clever but they were shallow attempts at trying to make them seem more "fantasy" epic-like. They were just barely concealed renamings of East, West, South, North, and Middle. And I didn't even get started on the writing. It was super choppy, suffered from an annoying excess of repetitive phrasing, and without a lot of "showing". The structure was all the same. Katsa went and did this, did that, felt this, and so on and so forth. Another problem was the insane amounts of info-dumping in the beginning. After the third page, I just couldn't give a rip about the places' history, what it looked like, who was who's father.

I can see why a lot of people love this book. There's romance, a super strong female character that kicks butt, and the tried and true quest/adventure formula of a fantasy novel. But it's just not for me. I absolutely hate not finishing a series so I'll probably read the next one, but ugh, not looking forward to it.

My opinion? Avoid this book like the plague. I may probably be stoned to death for this review because every where I go it seems to be so well loved and praised with glowing reviews.

Elise (TheBookishActress) says

When a monster stopped behaving like a monster, did it stop being a monster? Did it become something else?

So fun fact, this is probably one of my most reread books of all time, and it was such a big influence on both what I write and what I love to read, and I love and appreciate it more every time. And I'd love if you all could appreciate it too along with me?

This book opens with a scene in which Katsa, a character graced with the skill to *kill* people - literally, actually murder them - putting a group of guards out cold rather than killing them in order to spare their lives while trying to rescue a falsely imprisoned old man. I've always said that strong character work is the best way to make a book memorable, and Cashore absolutely nails this down. **Katsa's character arc is next-**

level brilliant and honestly, it might be *why* I still read for characters. She goes from thinking of herself as a killer, a monster, a weapon, to thinking of herself as a justice-seeker. She's just a *bit* morally ambiguous, but she makes the right decisions for justice in moments where it counts. She's like... that character who does the right thing, but also can and will kill the bad guy to survive a horror movie. She's so realistically drawn, driven by emotion, and lovable.

Basically, Katsa's character journey is EVERYTHING to me, and she is my wife and my daughter and also ME and I love her. Moving on.

? **The romance is pitch-perfect**. Some of you may know that I'm a bit picky around romance plots, but Katsa and Po? Yeah, I don't have a single complaint here. Katsa and Po don't have ANY instalove going on. And they have some truly iconic banter. Po is also a genuinely good guy, rather than being a Tough Scary Bad Dude, and he's a dynamic character on his own. Basically, he's the only guy I could ever consider a book boyfriend. [I honestly meant this as a joke, but going back over my review... Po is the only good man in the world]

“Wonderful,” Po said. “It’s quite boring really, the way you beat me to death with your hands and feet, Katsa. It’ll be refreshing to have you come at me with a knife.”

? Cashore does *so* well by all her side characters, oh my god. Bitterblue is an entertaining and dynamic character, and in fact, she gets her own book later on. Po, Raffin, and Giddon are all incredibly vivid characters [and they all get more later]. It's kind of incredible how human all of these characters are, how they never feel like plot devices.

? All the plot, writing, and worldbuilding elements are there. The worldbuilding of this series is super good, first of all, and I love how the graces are a neutral element - both good and bad, depending on their use. [This is a trope I like, adore and I think reading this book so much as a kid might be why.] Also, the plot is really interesting - it's not exactly twisty, but you never jump ahead of the characters in what you figure out - and although much of the book is spent on a journey, there's so much character and relationship building that I never got bored. I have literally read this book, what, over twenty times? And **I have still never felt bored.** Also, I love KCashore's writing. I don't know what it is, but it feels so classic fantasy in a good way? God. Fucking love it.

? So also, this book is really fucking feminist, featuring a genuinely strong and developed gender non-conforming woman as a protagonist with a really great lady friendship at its heart. I've seen a lot of people complain about this book's “raging feminist agenda”. Well, they're not wrong; **“overly feminist” is just one more good thing in my mind.** And to be quite honest, the fact that some reviewers have decided Katsa not being feminine is a problem is kind of fucked up; like, I love that you lend your support to feminine heroines, but gnc lady protagonists are like... not a thing in YA. Kind of fucked up to hate on them for not being feminine, hm? This series does feature a rejection of marriage as a social construct; however, within the series, marriage is specifically framed as giving men legal control over their wives, so I honestly think Katsa's rejection of marriage in the context of this book is simply a realistic decision based on her world's version of marriage. Or maybe it's just really feminist to be under someone's thumb now.

? Oh, also, remember in like, 2010, when YA was a hellscape and you had to like, beg for just one damn side character of color? Let me run this book, published in 2008, down for you: gnc woman helps save a biracial woman of color from persecution while falling in love with disabled man of color because he recognizes that she will always feel the need to be the strong one. [I will also note that after getting criticism for the use of a slightly ableist trope surrounding one blind character, she apologized in her author's note and improved his

treatment in later books.] Book two: bi black woman, survivor of abuse and rape, falls in love with black man because he's good to her and treats her like a person rather than a possession. Book three: biracial [and honestly, *very* easy to read as bi] woman of color dealing with ptsd tries to rule a kingdom while falling in love with a bi man of color and also, fighting for a return to her old culture and to freedom of the press with the assistance of her many gay friends [including three side characters from this book and two lesbians who run a print shop].

? Oddly, one of my favorite parts of this series is **how different and awesome each book is**. *Graceling* is an action-adventure story about redemption and self-hatred. *Fire* is a political story about agency, rape culture, and abusive relationships, both domestic and parental. *Bitterblue* is a slow-burn mystery, character study, and bildungsroman about a nation growing up and letting go, all wrapped in one. All three of these books are executed so well that your favorite will depend mostly on **what themes touch you the most**. For me, *Graceling* and *Bitterblue* [which I reviewed here hey hey hey] are the standouts, but they're honestly all great. What the fuck.

In summary: kickass girl heroines, an absolutely ICONIC romance, and possibly my favorite character arc of all time (not joking I love Katsa!!!). Everyone should read this and read the next two as well. And then DM me about it. I'm begging.

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Wendy Darling says

Loved it. Except for the raging feminist agenda.

NOTE: Since these two brief, flippant sentences have gotten so many trolls over the years, I'll just add that I support the book's feminist ideals 100%.

What I do not like is the way we're hammered over the head with the message. (The "raging" part, if you will.) It's inelegant, tiresome soapboxing that managed to annoy someone who actually *agrees* with the principles, so I don't know how it's going to persuade anyone who does not. Katsa's views also express the kind of feminism that seem to be extremely critical of other women's choices, which I found off-putting.

There's a lengthy discussion below where I go into my feelings further with people who are discussing in a reasonable manner, although I certainly don't need to justify my opinions to those who are only interested in telling people off on the internet. Nice job on not bothering to do 2 seconds' more research, but hey. Self-righteous outrage is so much easier.

But you know, people who *don't* agree with the book's feminine philosophy actually do have a right to that opinion, too. Why is it so goddamned difficult to respect that? That doesn't seem to be in the spirit of independent thinking and free will that feminism is purportedly all about.

I've come to realize that I probably shouldn't have used the word "agenda," however. As someone who believes that women are capable of carving out whatever life they want (though, I might add, Katsa is not nearly so tolerant of other women's choices) and not being as aware of how politically charged that word has become in denigrating causes/beliefs, I didn't read the same kinds of negative connotations into it that clearly others have. An unfortunate choice in words that I've come to regret.

