



## The Poison Master

*Liz Williams*

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## **The Poison Master** Liz Williams

Liz Williams is one of science fiction's boldest new writers and this novel is one of her most profound speculations on freedom, love, and human destiny. On a distant world ruled by an alien race, humanity is enslaved, having forgotten its own past and condemned to have no future--until one woman is offered a choice that could restore humanity's freedom.

## **The Poison Master**

On the planet of Latent Emanation, humans are the lowest class, at the mercy of their mysterious alien rulers, the Lords of Night. But Alivet Dee, an alchemist, can't help but question the Lords' rule ever since her twin sister was taken to serve in their palace. Alivet saves every penny to pay her sister's unbonding fee, but her plan is destroyed when one of her potions kills a wealthy client--and Alivet finds herself wanted for murder. Her only hope is the darkly attractive man who may have engineered her downfall but who still offers her a last chance of salvation.

A Poison Master from the planet Hathes, Arieth Mahedi Ghairen needs an alchemist of Alivet's expertise to find the one drug that can take down the Lords--and free the universe from their rule. Sequestered in Ghairen's fortress laboratory, lied to by both her new ally and his daughter's enigmatic governess, Alivet doesn't know whom to trust or where to turn for answers. But driven to undo her sister's fate, Alivet races to hone her skills in time--even as time runs out.

## **The Poison Master Details**

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Author : Liz Williams

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## From Reader Review The Poison Master for online ebook

### Angelica says

#### 94. THE POISON MASTER, BY LIZ WILLIAMS

Recommended by Miriam for its great world building. She warned me that there were stuff I wouldn't like about the characters, though. She was right.

Synopsis: Alivet lives on Latent Emanation, a planet where humans are slaves to the Lords of Night. She's an apprentice alchemist, and is planning to save up enough so she can buy her twin sister from "embonding", but when one of her rich clients die, she's forced to seek the help of stranger.

Overall enjoyment: Welp. There were some really nice things. There were some very bad things. Mostly, and I'm going to have to caps it, THERE SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ROMANCE IN THIS BOOK. The romance with Ghairen was bizarre and grotesque, and it should never have been written. Other than that, it was fine.

Plot: I liked how she tells the story of Alivet in parallel with John Dee, showing how Latent Emanation came to be in the first place. It integrates the world building with the main plot without making it over-descriptive and boring. The intrigue and mystery part was also nicely done. The only thing that sucked was the romance. It comes out of nowhere, it's badly developed, and has a nonsensical conclusion.

Characters: Up to a point, they were nicely done. Alivet is capable without being super-human, resourceful without being unrealistic, courageous without being stupid. Once again, the only bad part was the romance. It seemed like Alivet had a double personality: one who went through the story, and another whose sole purpose was to get horny whenever Ghairen was around. Her reactions to him were so out of character and artificial, one way this book could be fixed is if someone went through the text simply deleting all those passages. They are completely unconnected to the rest, have no part whatsoever on their character development, and would probably not be missed by anyone (much less the characters themselves).

World/setting: The main part, the one everyone who reads this book compliments. It is, indeed, quite a nice piece of world building. She mixes science-fiction with alchemy and fantasy, and a bit of religion for good measure. Some aspects could have been more explained, or better exploited (I would have liked to know more about the native races of those other worlds, for instance), but that would have been a plus, not a necessity.

Writing style: WHY DID THERE HAVE TO BE ROMANCE IN THIS?? My honest theory is that Liz had already finished writing her book, but when she tried to submit it for publication, someone (maybe the editor) told her she absolutely HAD to have romance in it, since it's YA. So she went back and tried to see where she could shove some kind of romance. Maybe she thought about Alivet and Ghairen's daughter, but decided against it. Finally, she decided it had to be Alivet and Ghairen, and then tried to make it happen, but she was already in love with the original story, so she didn't want to change anything. That is the most likely explanation for how bizarre those romance passages are... On the other passages, though, the writing is pleasant and straightforward.

Representation: There isn't much... There are aliens, though.

Political correctness: Again, WHAT THE HELL WAS GOING ON WITH THAT ROMANCE?? It was all kinds of crappy. He's domineering, over-controlling, he locks her up on her room at night, and actually shackles her to him once. He doesn't trust her, or tells her anything. Oh, yeah, also, SHE'S 16 AND HE'S OVER 40!! And don't tell me that his species experiences time differently, HE HAS A DAUGHTER WHO'S ONLY ONE OR TWO YEARS YOUNGER THAN ALIVET HERSELF. That's just disgusting. Speaking of disgusting, the very first time that they kind of get it on ALIVET BELIEVES HE IS RAPING HIS DAUGHTER. Really. For serious. Because, of course, there is nothing like a child molester to get a girl's juices flowing, am I right, ladies?

Final rating: 4 stars for the story/characters/worldbuilding, 0 stars for the romance = 2 stars.

Up next: How to Be a Heroine, by Samantha Ellis

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### **Erica Anderson says**

This was a really unusual book--I can't think of anything to compare to it in terms of plot or originality. Although it has science fiction elements (interplanetary travel), there is also a strong sense of the fantastical (mysterious creatures, mystical transport). We have a swoon-worthy, enigmatic poison master who seeks out the heroine, an alchemist, for assistance in destroying the evil beings who rule her world.

The story is told from the heroine perspective, and much of the tension comes from her inability to trust the poison master (for which she has good reason). Williams pays a lot of attention to character and setting. There's good pacing, mystery, and even a bit of romance. If you're in the mood for something out of the ordinary, *The Poison Master* is a good bet.

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### **Freya says**

Wow. Well I loved this book, and it's been the first time in a while that I haven't been able to put a book down. There's so much going on in this book! It's first and foremost a sci-fi but with poisons, alchemy and some historical fiction mixed in along with a smidgeon of old religious and cultural practices. Really very exciting and different to a lot of things I've been reading lately - this book is a keeper :P

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### **Parallax says**

Alivet works as an apothecarist/alchemy to pay off her twin sister's enbondment to the Lords of the Night, the mysterious rulers of the planet. She is framed for poisoning a noblewoman, and agrees to work with Ghairen, an offworlder poison master assassin who needs her help in poisoning the Lords.

I was drawn into the worldbuilding, where the societies on the planets seem to be based on some sort of alchemical classification or model. The Lords of Night were a mixture of angel, demon, unknowable advanced alien to the point of being magical, and Cthulian. I liked the mysticism, the atmosphere of the world, and the wacky drug trips towards enlightenment. The plot meandered in places and didn't quite gel together. I couldn't get into the romantic subplot, even though I'd originally picked up this book because I'd heard it was a Gothic novel in space. The Gothic genre parts were actually the low points for me, and I ended

up being more interested in the alchemy mysticism.

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### Ryan says

The first time I read this book, in the form of a borrowed ARC shamefully never returned, it totally blew my mind. I'd never come across something so compellingly atmospheric and unique, and I must have read it four or five times. Coming back to it now, certain elements look more familiar, in particular the titular Poison Master has the moody flavor of vampire princes the world round. I'm also still not convinced that John Dee's narrative adds all that much to the work.

Nonetheless, this book is easily the most seamless blending of SF and fantasy tropes I know of, violating traditional assumptions left and right until the reader doesn't know up from down and tosses all categories out the window in favor of the work as it stands. At least, I like to think so; the overall rating indicates others found it less than compelling.

I'm now taking a crack at Williams' other works. So far, her first and second books could not hold a candle to this one, and it's neat to watch her confidence grow until she's finally ready to totally own her work.

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### Mervi says

A stand-alone SF book.

The Poison Master begins in 1547 when Doctor John Dee is trying to convince Sir John Cheke that Dee's large mechanical bee can be made to fly – with ropes and pulleys. Dee is a mathematician and dreams of calculating astronomical journeys. We follow his experiments throughout the years. The book has twelve parts with two to five short chapters, and each part begins with a chapter about John Dee.

But the main character of the book is Alchemical Apothecary Alivet Dee whose twin sister has been Enbonded to the Lords of Night. Alivet is trying to make enough money that she can buy her sister free. She's even moved to the fringes of the city of Levanah because the rent is lower and she can save more money that way. As an apothecary, Alivet makes drugs and perfumes, and her biggest employer is Genever Thant who arranges for new experiences for the jaded rich. On her free time, Alivet takes part in the Search where the humans are put under a trance and search their subconscious for information about their origin. The Unpriests, who serve the Lords of Night, have made the Search illegal so it's done in secret.

But then everything goes wrong. During an experience orchestrated by Thant, one of Thant's clients dies. Thant flees and so does Alivet who suspects that Thant will blame her. To Alivet's surprise, a man from another planet contacts Alivet and wants her help in overthrowing the Lords. In exchange, the man will help Alivet free her twin. Alivet agrees.

The red-eyed man from the planet Hathes is Arieth Ghairen, the Poison Master. Alivet can't trust him and yet she's attracted to him. Ghairen takes Alivet through a portal and into a starship and then to his world, where she can start to work on an alchemical poison which could defeat the Lords of Night.

I really enjoyed the world building. The book has two distinct worlds. Alivet's home is Latent Emanations, where a large group of humans live, essentially enslaved by the Lords of Night and to their Unpriests. The Unpriests use high technology which is forbidden from the rest of the population. The world has also a native species, the anubes, whose passion seems to be traveling and bringing other people to their destination. They seem quite independent from the humans. Ghairen's world Hathes has high technology which seems to be available to all. Hathes has also a native population which seems to be enslaved by the humans. They work as servants and live in squalor.

The people who live in Latent Emanation know that the Lords of Night have brought them there, but they don't know from where they have come and they don't seem to remember much of their previous culture. For example, Alivet has a locket her grandmother gave her. It has a carving of a crucified man but Alivet doesn't know who he is or why he's depicted that way. The Lords take men and women to their palaces from time to time, and they aren't seen after that. The Unpriests are feared and they seem to sort of keep up law, but in an unpredictable way which make the population scared of them. Both men and woman are Unpriests.

Also, the drugs Alivet use are somehow alive. They have souls and Alivet can communicate with them when she's in a trance.

Alivet is a very active protagonist. She's determined to get her sister back and willing to do whatever it takes. If that means having to work with a Poison Master, so be it. Even though Alivet is attracted to Ghairen, she doesn't trust him, and he's very close mouthed about his past and motives. Alivet is also curious and wants to solve mysteries. While she's attracted to Ghairen, she's determined to get business done with before she even thinks about him more, so this isn't a romance.

John Dee is greatly interested in mathematics. He's a religious man and he thinks that he's just using the brain that his God gave him, even though religious authorities call his work heresy. We follow his life through decades and as far as I can tell, most of it is accurate, except that in this book he sees angels and communicates with them.

An interesting parallel between the two Dees is that in John's chapters, all the people are male, except for the brief appearances of Dee's wife and Queen Elizabeth, while in Alivet's chapters most of the characters are women. In John's time it's because the people who had the leisure and power to engage in alchemy and mathematics, were male. With Alivet, the people closest to her are her sister and aunt. Later, the people she meets are mostly women. I don't know if this is a conscious parallel.

The plot advances at a good pace but the ending is somewhat abrupt.

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### **Carly says**

**\*\*edited 11/28/13**

The Poison Master was interesting and the world was original.

Alivet, the protagonist, is an alchemist on Latent Emanation, a dark, damp world ruled by the insectoid Lords of Night who keep humans enslaved via a brutal system enforced by "unpriests". The people themselves are docile, sodden with drugs and despair, their only rebellion the secret meetings where they search for their origin in drug-induced dreams.

**...And that's all I'm going to post here.**

**The rest of my (rather verbose) review is posted over here at Booklikes.**

**Why? Because I strongly disapprove of GoodReads' new policy of censorship.**

(The link brings you to a summary of The Story So Far, which has facts and links so you can make up your own mind about the GR debacle.)

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### **Magnus says**

The ideas are good but the writing and narrative leave something to be desired. The story treads water for much too long, and I feel the main character is mostly just along for the ride. The side storyline takes much too long to bear fruit and doesn't complement the ongoing narrative.

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### **Andrew says**

I can tell when I have been too long away from a certain genre or author – as I found out with this title. I really enjoyed the Detective Inspector Chen series (Snake Agent) and I have had this title for a while promising myself many times that I would read it.

Well after my recently spate of artwork books I thought it was time to go back to a more text orientated book, and this one came most immediately to hand.

The book was incredibly accessible and fun to read – the characters though alien and difficult to read at times were still easy to connect with and suitably realistic. Enough in fact that you could actually associate with them such that when plot twists happened (as if you didn't expect them to) you felt suitably relieved or outraged. Once you became accustomed to the flora and fauna names the storyline flowed along a very rapid rate. My only criticism is that it would be great to see where the characters from this book would go next (the idea of a poison master and alchemist working together open up all sorts of possibilities)

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### **Peter Tillman says**

Dave Kennedy has described tPM as "Dr Dee In Space, as told by Vance." I finished it, but didn't much care for it (sigh). I found the Elizabethan framing story to be (mostly) an annoying distraction. Alchemical apothecary Alivet Dee's interplanetary adventures are pretty entertaining, and certainly colorfully written. Comes to an abrupt and unsatisfying ending, perhaps to leave room for a sequel. Eh.

[from an rasfw Usenet post, 2004]

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### **Princessjay says**

Score breakdown:

- 4 for the world building, the fascinating cultures based on alchemical elements
- 2 for plot, characterization, the abrupt romance that lacked any build-up or foundation, and the general lack of character logic

This world being full of book yet me short on minutes, my primary gauge for what constitutes a good book is if it keeps me flipping the pages. Despite the thin plot and characterization, THE POISON MASTER kept me up to the wee hours trying to reach its (telegraphed and kinda wimpy) conclusion. The worlds described therein are fascinating--parc-verticales and the various dramatic architecture, drugs that have "souls" which could be convinced to do one thing or another. Creative stuff.

On the downside, the main characters are basically cardboard. The novel ends with more questions left unanswered than not. The heroine is a strong female with a single preoccupation in life--to save her twin from the evil villains. However, despite being born in what seems like a backwater world where high tech is outlawed from the masses, she accepts seemingly-too-good offers from mysterious off-worlders with amazing calmness. Just off she goes to overthrow the masters of all the known planets, armed with a plan as insubstantial as when mice plot to overthrow supersonic jetfighters.

And what about that mysterious off-worlder? No background information for him, really. No details on his origin or background, only the barest reasons for his motivation, no interactions shown between him and his fellows. For a man with the novel named after him... he is a blank, and blandly so. Finally, what's the story behind those red eyes? I was captivated by their description--"two garnets set on a fan of bone"--lovely. ...AND?

I could go on, but won't. Regardless, I recommend this book for an interesting journey to the four worlds, but nothing more.

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### **Mat says**

It's nod bad, just insipid...

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### **Nancyri9 says**

Really 3.5 stars. Slow story yet parts intriguing and engrossing. Kept me guessing who was good or evil. Liked the ending

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### **Pam Baddeley says**

A novel in which the world building is good and we meet some strange and interesting characters and societies, plus there is an overall attempt to link this to Cabalistic beliefs from the middle ages. The story is divided between a timeline in the 16th century and one in the far future. In the 16th century, the historical character, Dr John Dee, initially an artificer, alchemist and mathematician with big ideas, constrained by the need to avoid reprisals from the Catholic Church, eventually becomes the leader of an expedition to a 'new world', one which is extraterrestrial but which he, contacted by an 'angel', begins to suspect may not be quite

what it seems.

In the far future, the main character is his distant descendant, Alivet Dee, a talented alchemist and apothecary, engaged in one of the few trades which poor women such as herself are allowed to work in. She is attempting to save enough money to release her twin sister from enbonding: slavery to the alien overlords which do not fully exist in the physical dimension. The humans on her planet are descendants from those brought there by those overlords. Disaster strikes when Alivet is framed for the murder of one of her clients and has to go on the run. She is helped by a strange man with red eyes, who turns out to be Ghairen and the title character. He is from another planet where he is part of a guild of poisoners, and he needs Alivet's help to distill a substance which he hopes will kill the alien rulers.

The ideas in this book are based on alchemy and the Cabalistic belief system, which calls Earth and various other planets by different names. Some of this was vaguely familiar as I'd read a book on the subject many years before. There is also the strange notion that the various drugs used in the story have their own 'spirit' which the alchemist can communicate with while in a trance state. I found it interesting although not entirely convincing. There is also the crime/adventure element of Alivet having to learn to survive, eventually on two other worlds, and to deal with various people who may or may not be lying and using her for their own ends.

I would have enjoyed the story more if the rather forced romance between Alivet and the poison master, Ghairen, had been dropped. It doesn't come across as convincing and is, in fact, distasteful, given that at one point she thinks he might be sexually abusing his daughter and still finds him a turn on. That element could have been expunged without harming the story in any way. For that reason, what would probably have been a 4-star rating reduced by the end to a 3.

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### **Daniel says**

I liked Williams' characters in this book. The Poisonmaster had some unique abilities, and I had fun trying to imagine what it would be like to command an intimate knowledge of chemistry and to secret dozens of lethal substances on my person. The society of the Poisonmasters had promise, and I wish Williams had take the story further in this direction. The romance that she develops is typical, and its connection to greater events has a fairy-tale quality that was lost on me. Since Williams is a talented writer, I enjoyed the book.

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