



The Oathbound

Mercedes Lackey

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Tarma witnessed her clan's murder and, swearing vengeance, became a master warrior. Kethry fled her forced "marriage" and became an adept--pledging her power to the greatest good. When Kethry obtains a magical sword which draws her to others in need, the two vow to avenge the wrongs done to womanhood.

The Oathbound Details

Date : Published July 5th 1988 by DAW

ISBN : 9780886774141

Author : Mercedes Lackey

Format : Mass Market Paperback 302 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction, Science Fiction Fantasy

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From Reader Review The Oathbound for online ebook

Kathleen says

While it is rare for a Valdemar novel, the magically bound best friends in this book are both human. Yes, there is a magically talking dog, but he's completely tertiary, and the horses can't talk at all. This trilogy follows the adventures of a mage and a nomadic warrior--both women who've been done wrong by the world--as they right wrongs and fight demons.

This book was actually a little less girl-powerful than I was expecting. Tarma--the nomadic swordswoman--is taught by spirits who seem to be almost entirely men for all that her Goddess is a woman. Moreover, every victim we actually meet in this book is a woman--usually one that has been raped horribly. Worst of all, the greatest punishment that anyone can devise is to trap the men in illusionary female bodies. The first time Kethry--the mage--uses this punishment *is* poetic enough, sending the rapist bandit leader back to his gang-banging-band, but the subsequent repetition of this punishment as completely torturous through the rest of the novel leaves me cold. Usually, Lackey is considerably better with sexual politics.

Overall, however, I like exploring outside of Valdemar, in what we might call the less perfect lands.

Verechnaya says

I don't know why I went into this book believing it to have a feminist vibe— albeit some 70s first wave feminism, complete with slut shamey, creepy fetichistic and essentialist vibes, as well as the good ol' rape, which the author uses and... Well, you know the rest.

Warning : spoilers ahead.

And boy is this book rapey. Both of the characters are raped in their childhood, which sets both of them onto their path of warriorhood, and on the path of this book's disgusting relationship with womanhood and/or femininity.

There are three types of women in this book : Tarma, the "sexless" warrior, gross and ignorant depiction of asexuality as she pledges herself to her warrior goddess, thus rendering her infertile (because apparently you can't be a warrior and a fertile woman who wants to have children at some point— fucking is soooooo distracting innit). That alone should raise a couple of red flags, but this is only the beginning of this book's bizarre relationship to gender and womanhood(s)

Then there are the other women. I'm going to be very crude here, but that is only because of the caricature this book makes of them : they're all "sluts". Or "whores". They're all rape fodder for the evil characters. They're not fighters, therefore they're all fucktoys.

Then there's Kethry, our sorceress, who's in the middle : she's sexy, yes, but she's also a warrior! Therefore, she doesn't care about sex. Still. She'll not escape being reduced to her genitals, as she'll pledge to bear children to... Well, fill her blood sister's clan. Okay.

The fact is, women in this book are at a constant risk to being reduced to their body, even worse, to the

second side of a disgusting dichotomy between strong woman and raped woman, in a crappy slut-shaming/victim blaming vibe. The protagonists are raped, many times, and the book doesn't stop at turning their enemies into women (or casting illusions on them so they look like one) so they'll be raped. I swear they actually do that! And the way they defeat the big evil demon rapist (he's literally ALL about gaining power and raping women) is by turning him into a sexy woman, which will rob him of his power. They main characters will themselves not fret at hiding themselves under sexy bimbo illusions to lure enemies into raping them— and one will even be turned into a sexier version of herself so she can be raped.

Tired of reading about rape? God, me too. There's literally NOT a single consensual sex act in this book, and not even mention of one. Our heroes are supposed to be bound by geas to help women, but they never truly help them— save but one time, a woman who's —shocker— not raped, not sexual, BUT wounded by childbirth. Instead, they trod through demons and bandits, never really seeming to care for the raped women around them (never even caring for their own rapes beside the "ugh my ass hurts"), never showing a single shred of sympathy to one— they're unamused, silent, tropes. Even "strong" side characters, a witch and a thief, showing curiosity towards the demon rapist cult, are shown raped and turned into sexual women. That's what you get for being curious about heterosexuality, girls! Hell the characters even dish out some sexual violence themselves as they strip two women naked to steal their clothes, before leaving them unconscious in some empty street. Help women, but, yknow, not the sluts. I guess that's how swerfs rationalize their hatred of sex workers these days.

Now I've finished this book I can understand the kind of twisted ideas it's standing on. I feel like this author misread Andrea Dworkin somewhere and went for the "all "penis in vagina sex" is rape" trope, because certainly it seems that all mention of heterosexuality in this book is rapey. Jesus, even games of thrones had some consensual sex in it. Sadly, since lesbian stuff (or political lesbian stuff) doesn't sell really well, the author went for platonic relationship. I hope the second book doesn't feature transgender women... I can see that trainwreck coming a galaxy away.

And the worst thing is, I'm not even into dudes. I'm bored by heterosexuality. I prefer my books without men. I even enjoy consensual bdsm and power fantasies on occasion. But this. This ain't it. This is almost worst than men authors who write a man, slap boobs on him, (yes I'm being cissexist but i'm caricaturing their ideas here), and have her say things like "you're being beaten by a girl! Shameful!")

Hugh. I'm not reading that second book.

If I wanted rapes, essentialism, and women being reduced to their genitals and empowered through agender asexuality, I'd read... Idk. Rape or mind control erotica.

Tori says

This was just SO underwhelming. Anytime the tension built up into something interesting, like a fight or confrontation or drama, it would all be skipped over and suddenly resolved. Boring.

TOM says

This read like it was comprised of a number of short stories just stuck together, which apparently it was! It doesn't have much plot, chapters are disconnected and often the narrative builds up to a climax... then it

completely skips the event to the characters talking about what happened later on which is frustrating.

Not great.

A number of people have commented on the amount of rape and abuse in this story already so I won't go over old ground but a lot of it is dealt with in a problematic way, rapists being punished by having their crime repeated on them etc. Men being punished for abuse by being turned into women and then being abused themselves? No thanks.

Pam Baddeley says

I read 'By the Sword' before this book - which begins when the two protagonists of this series are older women - and liked both characters, especially the swordswoman Tarma, so decided to give this a try. I had originally decided to give it away after finding Lackey's *Last Herald Mage* series full of angsty wallow and sadomasochism, but was pleasantly surprised to find 'By the Sword' a workmanlike fantasy - with various flaws as I mentioned in my review, but still interesting. So I was expecting something similar from this book and wanted to read about the earlier lives of these two characters.

Unfortunately I was somewhat disappointed. Firstly, this book starts off when the two characters have already met - their origin story was published in a volume of the *Sword and Sorceress* series. That is rather odd - it isn't unusual for science fiction or fantasy novels to start off as short stories published in SF/F magazines, which are either expanded subsequently or else have other segments added on - Anne McCaffrey's *DragonFlight*, for example, where the opening 'Weyr Search' story won a Hugo award in its own right, or Vondra McIntyre's 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand' which won a Nebula award and appeared in a couple of collections of short stories, but still became the first part of her novel 'Dreamsnake'. So it is odd that the story of how the two main characters met is not reprinted here, though the events it covers are mentioned sufficiently that it's possible to work out the rough sequence.

Tarma is a plains warrior whose tribe had been wiped out by bandits. She had pledged herself to the tribal warrior goddess in her quest for vengeance and now is a superb fighter, who has been trained by the spirits of various deceased members of her tribe. Kethry is a mage from the White Winds school whose ethos is to travel while they are Journeymen until they develop the power and abilities necessary to progress to Master level whereupon they usually set up their own mage school. Somehow - and this is where it would have been useful for that original story to be included - she became bonded with a magic sword, Need, which works for women but not against women and has a tendency to force her to go to the aid of women who are endangered. In that first story, the two women apparently ended up bonded magically by the goddess and, because Tarma's vows make her "asexual" Kethry agrees to rebuild Tarma's tribe by eventually having as many kids as she can manage.

Slightly odd but I knew from reading 'By the Sword' that eventually she went on to have seven children whom the two women brought up and who formed the core group of the tribe, going on to marry people in other tribes who then joined, plus their eventual reputation etc lead orphans from other tribes to join. By the time of that later novel, the tribe is back up to strength and is wealthy from breeding the superb horses for which the tribes are famed.

This book, however, doesn't get the two far towards that goal. It is rather oddly structured with some episodic tales of how they become involved in a few incidents where Kethry is forced to answer Need's drive

- a woman who is accused of her husband's murder in a classic "locked room" mystery, for example. But in at least some cases, the build up is there but then in a very odd structural quirk, the story then switches to afterwards, where the characters are sitting around with friends in a pub, discussing what has happened - the dramatic scene the reader didn't get to see - and congratulating each other on their legal expertise or whatever which resolved the problem. So that was one rather odd aspect of it. There was, in fact, quite a lot of exposition and people discussing and telling each other things rather than showing it dramatically: a tendency which was a little problem in 'By the Sword' but seems a big feature here.

There is also a large and disturbing aspect which might be a trigger warning for some readers. This book has a lot of rape - not described in detail, but it is there as a constant theme. Kethry had suffered it from an abusive husband - eventually she tells Tarma about it in a conversation. Tarma herself had apparently been gang raped by the murderers of her tribe, and in this story ends up having the same done again. But even odder she - and it seems Kethry - get over it in no time with no apparent lasting trauma. The only ones who don't are the poor young girls abducted by murderers and, very oddly, part of the retribution the two protagonists dish out is to put a glamour (spell of illusion) on the chief murderer so that he will end up subjected to the same treatment by his surviving men. This turns out to be a bad move on their part. And there is some very odd stuff in the last part of the book, also around this theme.

There were some aspects to the book that I liked: the relationship between the two women and the sentient wolf-cat creature who becomes the third member of their team, the details about horses - the author must have real knowledge of them - which are intelligent and trained to be as deadly in battle as their riders - and the friendship the women form with two mercenaries who give them good advice and don't subject them to unwanted advances. So those balancing points are enough to bring the book back up from the one star where it was headed to an overall 2 stars.

George Straatman says

Oathbound is my first foray into the writing of Mercedes Lackey. If I was to characterize this novel, I would say that it was a competently executed, workman-like piece of fantasy fiction. The story wouldn't be described as epic in scope and I think Ms. Lackey never intended that it should...the parameters of this story are fairly narrow. The two main characters...Tarma and Kethry...are engaging enough, but not overly memorable. If the depiction of men in this novel is any reflection of the author's view of the male species, then it is safe to say that she doesn't particularly hold the gender in high regard...most of the men who populate the story are unethical, immoral or simply evil...with a good measure of sexual deviance thrown in for good measure...Still, the story was enjoyable enough...the final punishment for the male demon antagonist was a fitting piece of irony...and so I will give this story 3.8/5.

Jeanne says

Trigger Warning: There are mentions of one of the characters rape that takes place in her past. Nothing too graphic, but there are no warnings for it in any of the blurbs I've seen. It's best for people to be prepared.

Note: This books is a bunch of loosely connected short stories collected into one book. It does not contain the story of Tarma and Kethry's first meeting, *Sword Sworn* published in the *Sword and Sorceresses III*

Anthology. While this book takes place in the same universe as Lackey's Heralds of Valdemar series, it takes place in a different region of the world (the Southern lands). They are just as magical, but we do not encounter any characters from the other series and the tone of these books are different.

Review proper:

This books is a fantastic fun read. I highly recommend it to any fans of fantasy, especially if they are looking for female centric stories with humor and intricate world building on par of Tolkien and GRRM. Though I would hesitate to call this epic fantasy, because it's really more about the story of two women, who are best friends and warriors.

I first read these book as a teenager, after unsuccessfully attempting to slog my way through various high fantasy series. As a teenage girl, and woman of color, I was longing to read about someone like me, while still exploring the concepts and world building of the fantasy genre. In other words, I was bored to death of white man fantasy. Where women were relegated to damsels, canon fodder or sexist jokes. Where there wasn't a single ethnic character, or the supernatural creatures were thinly veiled racist stereotypes ala JarJar Binks.

Enter my foster mother who was tired of my bitching. She slapped down her well worn copies of The Oathbound and Oathbreakers, telling me to shut up and read. To this day I'm so grateful to her for giving me the gift of Mercedes Lackey's books. Even though it has been two decades since I first read these books they still stand as some of the most entertaining and endearing of all the books I own.

If you're looking for books with a woman of color in a lead role, where a female friendship is set center stage and that has a of cheeky sense of humor these books are for you.

This book also has one of the most positive representations of an asexual character I've ever read. The world has gay and lesbian characters who are viewed in a positive light. (In fact, Lackey has a prequel series set in this world, north in the kingdom of Valdemar about a gay man called Valdemar: The Last Herald Mage. Which I highly recommend too).

This is fantasy with a female voice, written to entertain and amuse and it does.

Jenia says

I really wish I liked this book more than I did. The idea promised by the cover - two oath-sisters, wielding magic and the sword, whose purpose is to protect women - is super badass. But I feel like the word that best fits the actual book is "odd".

The structure of the book is odd: multiple times, there'd be a fun buildup to a cool scene/adventure (e.g. there's someone to fight!/they got hired as bodyguards!) but then the actual meat of the thing would be skipped and the next scene would be the bit after ("Let's sit around and drink together and chat about how awesome that fight we just had was."/"OK now we've finished escorting her and are looking for the next job.") I found it quite frustrating and.. odd.

I also found the treatment of rape... odd. For one, there's just so much of it: I feel like literally every female character except one got raped at some point in her life. At one point, the two heroines also punish a rapist by magicking him in a way that leads to him getting raped by his former friends. I'm just... I don't know. I would

definitely understand people getting angry or horrified over the treatment of rape but something about the way the whole thing is presented lead to my reaction just being "Wtf this is so odd."

I did really enjoy the sisterhood between the two heroines (though I admit I also found it odd that one offered to have children solely to keep the other's clan going). And some of the adventures they had resulted in great, very fun imagery. But altogether - and I'm not sure to what extent it's my unfamiliarity with the Sword & Sorcery genre, or if it should be viewed a product of its time (it's 30 year old female centric fantasy!), or what - but my overwhelming reaction wasn't "How fun, how badass" but "Huh... how odd."

Kogiopsis says

At the time I first read it, this was the first Mercedes Lackey book set on Velgarth I'd come across. I would later pick up Arrows of the Queen, but at that point all I'd read of her work was the Bardic Voices series - which I'd quite enjoyed.

As introductions to fantasy worlds go, this is by and large a good one. The characters of Tarma and Kethry remain some of my favorites in any Lackey book. (Kethry's granddaughter Kerowyn is probably my ultimate fave.) They're dynamic and engaging, have an interesting relationship and compelling conflicts, and are exactly the kind of heroes I love rooting for in classic sword-and-sorcery tales. (Given that they got their start in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Sword and Sorceress anthologies, this is little surprise.)

There were a couple of things I'd forgotten between that first readthrough and this second. First was the fact that the first T&K story isn't included in this volume. It was later published in the 'third' book of the series, Oathblood - which is really just a collection of missing stories, not a whole narrative in and of itself - and I've read it once there and once in the S&S volume where it was originally published, but it's been a long time since either and I was somewhat thrown off by the missing information.

The second thing that I'd forgotten is that this book, for all that it's somewhat disjointed, actually has a coherent overall arc in the development of Tarma and Kethry's relationship. They're still very new to their partnership and each other, and they spend the entire book working out problems so that they can function together better. It's gratifying to read, because I feel like this kind of complex relationship progression is... well, not exactly a hallmark of the sword and sorcery subgenre, as well as because it makes both of them much more realistic, sympathetic characters.

The third thing I'd forgotten was... less pleasant. The last third or so of the book follows a chain of events starting with bandit attacks on trading caravans and ending in a much larger confrontation. Near the beginning, Tarma and Kethry do something *very* out of character, and it just goes downhill from there. Trigger warning for rape in the spoilers that follow. (view spoiler)

Were it not for that disastrous segment, this book would still probably be five stars; however, given that, I cannot in good conscience rate it higher than three. Much as I love Tarma and Kethry, their relationship, and most of their escapades, this book is not their finest hour.

One more note - as anyone who's read a decent amount of Lackey knows, her books tend to have a lot of sexual violence in them. They're very much a product of a time where women's narratives in fiction were

mostly 'rape & revenge', and so I would advise any readers sensitive to or triggered by such content to avoid most of her work.

Melanie Rose says

More like a collection

I didn't feel like this was a complete novel. More like a collection of related short stories or novellas. I did enjoy it, but wished it was more cohesive.

Rebecca says

I will say this -- my favorite aspects of *Vows and Honor* duology/trilogy/whatever is that the main relationship is between two women and is platonic*. The *Oathbound* is about two women, Kethry, who used to be a noble of a poverty-stricken house, but after her brother practically sold her into marriage, she took up the path of the mage, and Tarma, a swordswoman from a Nomadic Horse Clan, who became a servant of her peoples' Goddess in order to get revenge on her clan's murder. The two became partners helping Tarma avenge her clan and kin after that, with Kethry volunteering to help Tarma restore her clan.

Most of the book seems to be reconstructed out of short stories -- some of the short stories were shown in their original form in *Oathblood*. You can kind of tell in that a lot of Tarma and Kethry's adventures are self-contained but inter-related. I can see why Lackey chose those works to make a book out of. It works very well for the book**.

For me, this book is kind of like my mother's Turkey Soup. There's nothing terribly special or amazing about it, but it's comfort food and has enough meat to be filling. *Swords and Sorcery* is one of my favorite styles of fantasy***, but I don't know if this is an artifact of the books I choose to read, but it usually seems to be a male/female pair that quickly descends into a romance. (Not that male/female pairs and UST can't be well done -- I am a fan of Lina and Gourry in Hajime Kanzaka's *Slayers* series and one could even say that Harry Dresden and Karrin Murphy from Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files* are a modern update -- one where the warrior was female and the wizard was male.)

* Okay, a non-platonic lesbian relationship in a book would also be cool.

** Given I once blogged about converting books to anime, it kind of makes me want an anime series about Tarma and Kethry. Because that would be awesome, and unlike some anime I've seen, it would convert well.

*** Need to read some of the original works in the genre. I'll add it to my List.

MrsJoseph says

What did I think? That's a hard one. *The Oathbound* was published 30 years ago. Let's think about that: Mercedes Lackey was certainly a pioneer of her field. In 1988, Mercedes Lackey managed to get a traditional publisher to publish her series starring TWO women with agency. A swordswoman and a

sorceress who also wields a sword. The two become mercenaries and there's nary a man to be seen.

That part is amazing. What wasn't so amazing was the small things: the causal (off page) gang rapes (there were two) that happen to Tarma; the child rape of Kethry; references to pedophilia; the rape and murder of googads of nameless women, etc. But even with all that, I have to step back in amazement that its still a pretty solid work. Its age is showing in places and its tone make it much closer to YA than it would have been 30 years ago...but I still enjoyed!

Amy says

I don't read a lot of short stories, but I really liked this collection. Tarma and Kethry are well thought out, engaging, strong characters.

The stories are a good addition to Valdemar lore - they provide some excellent background on Shin'a'in culture.

Highly recommended for anyone wanting to read some fantasy lore - especially for those who are already Mercedes Lackey fans.

Sarah says

There was an awful lot of rape in this book. All of it non-graphic, thank god, but holy shit, man. *Does a character need a tragic back story? Rape! What threat can we hang over our heroines' heads? Rape! How should we punish evil? Rape!* I understand wanting to create tension and establish that this world is a dangerous place, but at a certain point it starts to feel lazy.

Second problem with the book: too straight. There are nods to queer romance here or there, but good ol' Mercedes takes great pains to remind you that our main characters Aren't Like That. Later chapters in the book also feature a pretty weak understanding of the lines between sex and gender.

Third, there are some pacing issues. Sometimes it's more like reading several loosely strung together short stories rather than a single novel. I feel like I remember seeing somewhere that that is, in fact, the case. But I may be inventing excuses for my girl, Mercedes.

Because here's the thing: I actually liked the book. I had fun reading it and I'm gonna pick up the next in the series for sure. The characters (though somewhat static) were likeable, and the world-building was strong.

Was this a great book? No. But let's be honest: your average fantasy novel is pretty much garbage*. *The Oathbound* is above average for its genre.

*To be clear, I love fantasy. But we need to be real with each other and acknowledge that it's trash.

Milliebot says

Sooo...I was planning on doing a full review of this series once I'd read the two novels and the book of short stories/novellas. But after reading this first book and then letting it sit...I just don't care to continue. I liked the duo of strong female leads and the world-building was alright...there's potential in the magic system too. But honestly, nothing hooked me enough to make me want to continue on. And there's an awful lot of rape happening to our leads or mentioned in the past and it was overkill. The book mostly felt like a series of shorts strung together and while it wasn't for me, I'm hoping that Lackey's other work will interest me more.

♥Xeni♥ says

2014 reread:

You can definitely tell that these were short stories formerly published in the S&S magazine. They have that detached-but-connected feel to them. Still, excellent tales! It's lovely to see that Mercedes Lackey was already writing so well so early in her career.

First read: approx 2009

Chuck says

Since I've pretty much run out of Marion Zimmer Bradley titles, I thought I'd try Lackey, who collaborated with Bradley on a book.

I have to say that, overall, I liked this book; I really am intrigued by its two main characters, Tarma and Kethry. Lackey's "world" is, as is most fantasy, a medieval type culture. Tarma is one of the Plains people; Kethry is kind of a Paladin, a warrior with magic powers who is honor bound to do good.

My reservations are that the book is episodic; you can tell that this includes short stories that were stitched together to achieve novel length; except for two tales, the book is a series of adventures that have little to nothing to do with one another. Again, overall, it's a great read, but it lacks the through plot or story line that compels you to turn the page.

On the other hand, that can be a strength if you are either a sporadic reader who picks up books, quits, and picks them up again later, or if you need a book you can pick up anywhere and start reading. Maybe I've been spoiled by having recently read a number of well plotted books recently, but this was a concern.

My other worry was there were just some sentences in the book that hurt to read . . . misplaced modifiers and just some clunky writing. Not enough to make me stop reading, but it made me wonder about the quality of editing at Daw Books (esp as I've read several of their omnibus books that are rife with misspellings and other basic errors it's hard to believe are there in a professional publishing house).

Still, I want to read the other books in the series and I have enjoyed this enough that I think I want to read

more Lackey generally.

Crystal says

I understand this was initially released as a serial, but it suffers in book form. Every chapter has to waste time retelling bits just read, and I found that frustrating

Otherwise very enjoyable.

Jeff Kennedy says

I'm heavy into RITA award reading now and can't share those books, so I'm doing a bit more of my #readinghistory! I loved this whole series, but Tarma made a huge impression on me, back in the day. She started my interest in a true warrior woman.

CatBookMom says

Feb 2018 - bought the Kindle edition, since the pb one I have is pretty elderly by now. Am reminded just how annoying it is when the italics (ML uses them for mental dialog and mindreading, etc) are messed up in the middle of sentences, when the page-scanner screws up so many words ("Warl" becomes "Ward") or words are broken into nonsensical parts because they were hyphenated in the scanned copy ("reshea thing"), and when the breaks within a chapter, to indicate a change of scene or time passing, aren't there.

There's a new omnibus edition of all three of the Vows & Honor books that is scheduled to come out in April; I wonder if the publisher will just perpetuate all the current errors and make new ones, or if they'll pay someone with a brain and a knowledge of English to proofread.

2015- This isn't as good as book #2, at least from the perspective of many years of re-reading this little trilogy (duology?) But it's still a very good book, especially if you're just coming to these stories. (2018 - I think this rating may be because I *really* don't like the long story about the evil demon, which takes up a lot of the book.)
