



# Karen Memory

*Elizabeth Bear*

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## **Karen Memory** Elizabeth Bear

“You ain’t gonna like what I have to tell you, but I’m gonna tell you anyway. See, my name is Karen Memery, like memory only spelt with an e, and I’m one of the girls what works in the Hôtel Mon Cherie on Amity Street. Hôtel has a little hat over the o like that. It’s French, so Beatrice tells me.”

Hugo-Award winning author Elizabeth Bear offers something new in *Karen Memory*, an absolutely entrancing steampunk novel set in Seattle in the late 19th century—an era when the town was called Rapid City, when the parts we now call Seattle Underground were the whole town (and still on the surface), when airships plied the trade routes bringing would-be miners heading up to the gold fields of Alaska, and steam-powered mechanicals stalked the waterfront. Karen is a “soiled dove,” a young woman on her own who is making the best of her orphaned state by working in Madame Damnable’s high-quality bordello. Through Karen’s eyes we get to know the other girls in the house—a resourceful group—and the poor and the powerful of the town. Trouble erupts into her world one night when a badly injured girl arrives at their door, seeking sanctuary, followed by the man who holds her indenture, who has a machine that can take over anyone’s mind and control their actions. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, the next night brings a body dumped in their rubbish heap—a streetwalker who has been brutally murdered.

Bear brings alive this Jack-the-Ripper-type story of the old west with the light touch of Karen’s own memorable voice, and a mesmerizing evocation of classic steam-powered science.

## **Karen Memory Details**

Date : Published February 3rd 2015 by Tor Books

ISBN :

Author : Elizabeth Bear

Format : Kindle Edition 352 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Steampunk, Fantasy, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Lgbt, Westerns

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# From Reader Review Karen Memory for online ebook

## Robyn says

I just loved this. Truly, one of the most memorable books I've read this year (excuse the unintentional pun) and surely the best steampunk Western out there. Bear evokes the past so brilliantly without being a slave to it, and puts goddamn PEOPLE in it without care to race, gender, sexuality in such a real and wonderful way. It's a fantastical plot, unbelievable to be sure, but in the best possible dime novel way. All the stereotypes - whore with a heart of gold, etc - are there but turned on their head in a perfect, winking nod to the classics. I especially like how diverse the cast of characters is - far more true to history than the whitewash of so many Westerns. Anyway, highly recommended if you're the sort of person who would enjoy a book about a seamstress (read: prostitute) and her cunning battle to take down an arch-villain with the help of a freed-slave-cum-Marshall, his non-mysterious but extremely capable Native American side-kick, a transgendered fellow prostitute, a Chinese former prostitute turned rescuer of enslaved women, and her Indian love interest. (Just to name a few!)

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## Jim says

Okay, let's start with the publisher's description:

*"You ain't gonna like what I have to tell you, but I'm gonna tell you anyway. See, my name is Karen Memery, like memory only spelt with an e, and I'm one of the girls what works in the Hôtel Mon Cherie on Amity Street. Hôtel has a little hat over the o like that. It's French, so Beatrice tells me."*

*Hugo-Award winning author Elizabeth Bear offers something new in Karen Memory, an absolutely entrancing steampunk novel set in Seattle in the late 19th century—an era when the town was called Rapid City, when the parts we now call Seattle Underground were the whole town (and still on the surface), when airships plied the trade routes bringing would-be miners heading up to the gold fields of Alaska, and steam-powered mechanicals stalked the waterfront. Karen is a "soiled dove," a young woman on her own who is making the best of her orphaned state by working in Madame Damnable's high-quality bordello. Through Karen's eyes we get to know the other girls in the house—a resourceful group—and the poor and the powerful of the town. Trouble erupts into her world one night when a badly injured girl arrives at their door, seeking sanctuary, followed by the man who holds her indenture, who has a machine that can take over anyone's mind and control their actions. And as if that wasn't bad enough, the next night brings a body dumped in their rubbish heap—a streetwalker who has been brutally murdered.*

What the publisher really should have opened with is the fact that this book features a steam-powered Singer sewing machine mecha-suit that's been heavily modified and upgraded. Readers might ask if it really makes logical sense to transform a sewing machine into something so complicated and mechanically convoluted. To which one could reply, "Who cares? It's a freaking sewing machine mech!"

While there are other elements that are just plain fun, there's a lot more going on in this book. You've got a group of women teaming up against several different layers of villainy, from a serial killer to large-scale political mind-control schemery. There's high-stakes action with a nice bit of romance thrown in. Some of the plot revelations and twists at the end came a little too fast for me, but that might be a matter of personal taste.

Karen and company aren't exactly the privileged class of 19th century society, and Bear doesn't ignore the prejudices of the time. She's worked to create a diverse cast of characters, but those characters face additional challenges. Marshal Bass Reeves is a black man, and at one point is threatened with lynching. His partner, a Comanche named Tomoatooah, is forced to flee the town. And while Karen is relatively open-minded and accepting, you also see her using the language of the times, and occasionally stumbling over her own prejudices.

While Karen and her allies live and work in a bordello, nothing sexual happens on the page. Karen's life isn't romanticized, either. Bear acknowledges that this can be ugly work. But it's not something that needs to be on the page for the story Bear's telling.

Bear brings together a strong plot, an engaging voice, and good characters. (I'm particularly fond of the foul-mouthed Madame Damnable.)

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## Emily says

Once again I feel like I didn't read the same book as everyone else. Look - giving this 2 stars is me being generous here. I thought this book was ridiculous and unbelievable. I thought the plot was absurd and thin. Also, this book commits one of my largest book pet peeves - Love at first sight. We are basically told that Karen loves Priya - we never see it. I still have no idea what they saw in each other. This was just another book where I spent the entire time rolling my eyes and being super irritated. I only kept going with it because I needed a book for the "weird western" category of Reddit's fantasy bingo.

The Marshall is basically impotent, like a cat without his claws (that might be funny when you read the end of this) and he never really seems to do anything useful, only the bad guys had beneficial steampunk gadgets (well, they have more than gadgets - they have extreme advantages which again, were unbelievable and ridiculous). Karen sustains very serious injuries and then goes on fighting as if she was never injured. She acts like she's the only capable person in the entire time, and she screws up pretty much every time she tries to do something

I couldn't stand the way the main character talked. It was the most annoying dialect I've ever put up with in a book (probably made worse because it was an audio book and I had to hear it - I couldn't just gloss over it). Not only her dialect, but the phrasing she constantly used got on my last nerve. "I don't mind saying so", "If you take my meaning", "If you knowed what I mean"

YES I FREAKING GET IT!! I KNOWED WHAT SEWING WERE A EUPHEMISM FOR - YOU AINT GOT TO KEEP TELLING ME - IF YOU DON'T MIND ME SAYING SO - And I swear to god if she said "I thought I might up-my-chuck" one more time I was going to hurl my phone across the room just to get her to shut up.

Finally - the thing that I just couldn't get past - the goddamn similes every other sentence. It got so ridiculous and distracting I started writing them down - and these are just the ones I could remember or write down fast enough...and just the ones starting with "like" - there's an equal number that start with "as". So here you go - Just a fraction of the occurrences.

Like a sleeping kitten

Like a trash doll as big as her chest

Like a person looking into the horizon of my soul  
Like a prairie dog watching a coyote (pronounced kai-oat)  
Like a skin  
Like a shrieking tea kettle  
Like a strangled cat  
Like a stray cat heads headfirst into a splinter tree (WTF?)  
Like a squashed kitten (she loves her cat similes)  
Like a strangled calf  
Like he had springs for sinews  
Like they want to shatter  
Like a marriage license in a young man's hand  
Like a mouse in a loose box hoping not to get stomped  
Like a dying fish thumping its tail  
Like dead flowers from my wrist  
Like two warm, wet bladders  
Like a mouse in front of a cathole  
Like an unhinged gyroscope with pieces of me flying off  
Like god's own bread knife  
Like a couple of cats who bumped heads over a blue jay  
Like eagle's battered wings  
Like range bandannas  
Like a clapboard cliff  
Like I swallowed a pint of live worms  
Like the conductor in an orchestra pit

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## Becky says

I don't read a lot of steampunk. The Gail Carriger Parasol Protectorate series (though I count that as PNR more than anything, but I guess it does have steampunk qualities, so... \*shrug\*) and one or two others, and now this book. But my friend Colleen says that a lot of things are CALLED steampunk when they actually aren't - a distinction I'll likely never understand because I'm just not that into it to get the finer nuances of the steampunk genre/sub-genre stuff. (I'm bad at genre categorization anyway. Just look at my shelves. Exhibit A.)

I DID try to do my due diligence and find out what steampunk actually is and suchlike... But I didn't get very far. I started to read the wikipedia article and I tried to watch a youtube video explaining it... but I got bored. If you have a higher boredom threshold, I link you to the article and video, thusly: [Click here for the Wiki!](#) / [Click here for the video!](#)

Anyway. I think this book might could be steampunk... Unless Colleen says no, in which case I default to her decision.

I don't know if it's a very good example of it though. Is there steam? Yes. Are there devices that run on said steam? Indeed. But... that was kind of it. Is that enough to steampunk make? I defer to Colleen. She knows things.

I, personally, was hoping for a bit of a broader world-build than we got. I understand why we didn't get it, but I am still disappointed by the lack. Though I haven't read much steampunk, it is one of the settings that allows for such creativity in worldbuilding, and comes with it's own handy starting platform to build from. And I want to see what's been built. To spend so much time thinking of this alternate history world these characters live in, and then only show us a tiny sliver of it, is frustrating to me. I wanted more.

I was also frustrated by the narrative voice, and by extension, the main character. She narrates our story in a very London-y low class patois. "I knowed this and it weren't no problem." For instance. There were many, many times during the course of the story when I was caught up by her phrasing of something, and had to read it several times to understand what she was getting at. More than a few times, I had to conclude that I wasn't going to get it, and I'd continue on, only to have the context make it clear a couple sentences later.

Likewise, it was inconsistent. One sentence she'd say "knowed", then it was "know'd", then when things got serious she "knowed -*knew*- it" and then back to "knowed" with a smattering of *knews* thrown in for, I dunno, flavor?

She grew up on a farm, where her dad gentled horses, until he died and she was left destitute and had to turn to "seamstressing" (her euphemism for whoring). She's not educated, and it shows in her grammar. Which isn't a problem, usually. (Though I expect the authors who write these dialects to do them right.) But what IS a problem for me is that she is fucking smart. Smarter than she gives herself credit for. She knows words like "relict" and "prurience" and "pyrrhic" but can't manage to learn when to use the past-tense verb form, or avoid double negatives?

I was frustrated by this the whole book through, but then at the very end, when it was revealed that this was supposed to be the book she wrote about her adventures, Calamity Jane style, it irked me even more. Take the time to edit your shit, Karen! I don't care if it's your debut novel and you're only 16... If you want people to read your story, make it readable!

Madame Damnable irked me, too. She is described as a smart and forbidding woman, who is strong and protective of her girls, and brooks no bullshit. So it really bothered me that every sentence she uttered contained an F-bomb.

Yes. You read that right. It bothered ME, that she said some variety of fuck-word every time she opened her mouth.

Because she's better than that. I expect that type of woman to not need to resort to such vulgarity. She should be able to shut shit down with a look, or her presence alone. She's respected and revered - and the fucking language that comes out of her mouth spoils the whole image. And then to call it "artistry of language"... Are you kidding?? I curse. I curse like a fucking sailor. But I'm not a woman like the Madame is portrayed to be... who has clawed her way up from nothing and earned her stripes and is now a woman supporting herself and her house full of girls and staff who have nowhere else to go. She's a woman of different times, and I expected her to be... classier... even for a whorehouse madame. Because she was... except for when she spoke.

There were things that I did like about this though. I really liked the socio-political environment of the story, meaning the way that women were edging up to close the gap between what men were allowed to do (vote, hold office, wear pants, etc) and what women were allowed to do (lie back and think of airships?). I liked that there was a whole slew of cultural and ethnic diversity, and I really loved Tomoatooah. He definitely should have had a bigger role in this book!

I loved how the women in this story took matters into their own hands and tried to make things better for themselves and their peers - even though that was dangerous. I loved that Karen and her housemates loved and respected the 'negro' staff that worked with them, and didn't look down on them for being black. I loved that Karen fell in love with someone so different from her, and was willing to bridge the cultural and religious gaps, as well as societal gaps (one assumes - no mention of this in the book though) to be with her. I loved how she approached the romance as well... taking her time and letting the friendship grow into maybe something more... This was super refreshing. No freaking insta-love! WOOT WOOT!!

So, anyway, long story short. I liked it... I'd recommend it to certain readers that I think either wouldn't be bothered by the dialect, or wouldn't notice it. I'll likely check out more of Elizabeth Bear's books in the future though. It was well-written overall, except for a few nitpicks, and I've heard that another book of hers has a completely different feel, so I'm curious to see for myself.

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## **Nathan says**

Reposted to Booknest.eu

Gentle readers you might not know this about me but I am a shitkicker to the core. I may put on high airs and use proper grammar and such to the best of my ability but in reality I am genuine hick. I raised hog for most of my growing days and have a fair hand with a hoss. Get me around my mama's kin for more than an hour and this ol boy could fit in to the most authentic casting of Oklahoma y'all have ever seen.

So you bet your ass I fell in love with miss Karen Memery, spelled like Memory but with an 'e' there in the middle. She may not be from Oklahoma but with that accent I could sure enough take her home to meet my grandma. She is in Seattle territory, back before the states were all carved up, or maybe never will be since this ain't your granpappy's old west; there are airships and steam powered autotrons bouncing around that can't be seen in any old pictures I have ever laid my eyes on. Karen is a simple girl, which don't mean stupid, mind. She got enough lernen to read and has a real keen mind. But damned if her accent didn't make me think of family here and gone. I fell back into it and so far ain't looked back.

She calls herself a stargazer, and she pays her taxes as a seamstress, and I don't think you need a schoolmarm to tell you what that means. She got lucky though, fell in with the right type of lady who runs a better sort of house. Only has to take those clients that she needs and the house muscle don't let anything rough happen. Got herself a dream too, saving up to run with a stable of her own liker her and her daddy used to work before...well, just before. Would be no kind of story at all though if trouble didn't come around, or maybe it would be a different kind of story, but this is the kind of story were trouble does end up coming around.

A ground war is brewing, with Karen's Madame facing a bad sort of man who runs his own group of stargazers but in a whole different way. When two girls come to the door all bloody like a spark is hit that threatens to build quick. One of the girls escaped from Peter Bandel, the Madame's main competition in towns a right swarmy heel. The other gal is the one doing the break out, and has a reputation for doing it more than once. Peter damn sure wants back what he reckons is his by right, servitude he don't call slavery even with the lack of choice involved. It all goes to hell from there. Enter a U.S. Marshall chasing a serial killer, a little gun play and some steam contraptions, and a hell of a lot of people usually found sitting in the corner of a book instead standing up and taking action.

Shitkicker I may be but a long ways from the worst of the hick side of my family I sit. I love seeing a diverse cast take over a story completely. Did I mention Karen might lay with men, but paying is the only reason that would ever happen? No I didn't because it don't matter much where Karen's attention lays; at least until it does. Because when she finds love she fights for it with the same fire as anyone else would. The Hotel Mon Cherry ain't just color blind, it is completely blind. Women who are part of the madam's circle are loved and cherished, no matter their color or where their attraction lays or even if they have a little something extra under their skirt. Don't mean Seattle is suddenly the most enlightened town in the West, not at all. But a group of outsiders that stick together can do all right for themselves.

Call a spade a spade. Karen Memory (note the spelling, with an 'e' it is a name, but if that 'o' is there I am talking about the book and not the person), is a fast paced dime novel. This is a cast to adore, sure, but it ain't no character study. Adventure full of twists and turns, gun play and chases, and a few gizmos doing what they do make up the base of this tale. Louis L'Amore sits on a good many shelves in my family, bout the only books to be found outside of the bible, and as far as I know the man wrote one book forty different times. Black hats take the girl and the cowboy gets her back. And that is what we got, excepten the cowboy is a seamstress who ain't afraid to rough it up with the boys (or if she is she puts on her brave face and does it anyway). And she got a posse of men and women of every color and walk of life right there with her to back up her moves. Even the damsel of Karen's tale don't lay back and wait, doing her fair share throughout to make sure the black hats don't carry the day.

I ain't too certain this a book I will always remember. It is a simple story after all. But I am also pretty damn sure I haven't done my reading of a single book this fast in quite some time. Karen Memory is a tale full of diverse characters but it don't lean on that as its crutch nor a gimmick; it just runs a fun story using the people that have always been there but don't always get their face on the cover.

One last thing, any character that knows what a Tobiano is, even in just a single mention. Well, she is all right by me.

4 Stars

Copy for review provided by publisher.

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## **Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

4.5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.com/2015/02/03/b...>

"You ain't gonna like what I have to tell you, but I'm gonna tell you anyway. See, my name is Karen Memery, like memory only spelt with an e, and I'm one of the girls what works in the Hôtel Mon Cherie on Amity Street. Hôtel has a little hat over the o like that. It's French, so Beatrice tells me."

A lot of times, it's the books that initially fly under my radar which end up impressing me the most. This was the case with Karen Memory, whose description didn't actually appeal to me at first. After all, as much as I love steampunk, I've read so much of the genre that admittedly I've gotten a lot pickier in recent years. It's going to take more than just airships and clockwork gadgetry to entice me these days.

The moment I read the first paragraph though, I knew I was going to be in for a treat. It's not even just the "Old West" feel of the setting (which I'm a sucker for and gets me every time) that caught my attention, but



the distinct and down-to-earth voice of the narrator which immediately tugged at something in my heart. Right away, I knew I wanted to learn more about her. I wanted to get to know her and hear her story.

Our protagonist Karen Memory turns out to be a young “seamstress” (a euphemism those around her parts use for prostitute) working for Madame Damnable at one of Rapid City’s more upscale establishments. It’s late 19th century and the Pacific Northwest is at the height of another gold rush; like any frontier town that’s sprouted up around the mining industry, life is rough and the folks even rougher. Working girls like Karen at the Hôtel Mon Cherie know that the best way to survive is to stick together and look after one another, but not everyone is so fortunate to have an employer like Madame Damnable or friends to watch their back.

The calm is shattered one night when two young women arrive at the Mon Cherie seeking help and protection. This is how Karen first meets and falls in love with Priya, a prostitute who managed to escape the horrific conditions of a rival brothel, but not without its mean and nasty proprietor Peter Bantle in hot pursuit. Thwarted, Bantle vows to make Madame Damnable and her girls’ lives a living hell, and with what appears to be a mind-control device in his possession, he might be more dangerous than anyone believed. When the flogged and bloody corpses of women start appearing around town, one begins to wonder if all of this is connected somehow. A new lawman rides into town with his Comanche partner on the tail of a vicious serial killer, and together with Karen and the friends, this ragtag but resourceful crew is determined to get to the bottom of this conspiracy.

At times, Karen Memory did feel very much like my perfect book. It is imaginative steampunk that feels fresh and full of life, served up as a rich blend of mystery, suspense, action and romance. The end result is difficult to describe, but delightfully easy to enjoy. As I said before, I have a weakness for westerns and stories that take place during the expansion into the western frontier, so I was charmed at once by Rapid City, resplendently brought to life by Elizabeth Bear’s evocative and vivid descriptions. Despite a healthy dose of fantastical steampunk, we never lose sight of the distinctive characteristics or nuances of this particular era.

Karen herself is an amazing one-of-a-kind character, telling her story with a candidness that I found very charming. The narrative style won’t be for everyone, riddled with its colloquialisms and informal jargon, but it worked surprisingly well for me. It made Karen feel so real — I could practically hear her voice and imagine her mannerisms in my head. I’ll say this — whoever is narrating the audiobook will have her work cut out for her, as it’ll be hard to top what’s already written on paper. Usually prose littered with slang and grammatical errors, whether they’re intentional or not, would drive me nuts (especially my personal pet peeve, “would of” instead of “would’ve”, which Karen repeatedly commits). That I was able to overlook them in this case says a lot.

No doubt the book would not have been the same without Karen’s unique voice, but the other ladies at the Hôtel Mon Cherie surely deserve a mention too. This entire cast of brave and capable kickass women will rock your world and fill you with admiration. After Karen, I’m especially taken with the character of Madame, inspired by the real Mother Damnable, Mary Ann Conklin who ran Seattle’s first hotel and high-class brothel. For a certainty, this novel features no shortage of spirited women who will go to great lengths for those they love and what they believe in, and will not back down without a fight.

Karen Memory is a book about a lot of things — solving a mystery, hunting a merciless killer, saving the city from evil, and all the spectacular drama that comes along with such activities. But at its heart, the book is also about forging friendships, growing up, and chasing one’s dreams. Behind the rollicking adventure is also a softer, more introspective side to the story that will surely resonate with a lot of readers.

Final verdict? I would definitely recommend this. It's actually my first book by Elizabeth Bear, but regardless of whether you're a long-time fan of the author or relatively new to her work like me, you really can't go wrong with this one. Check it out.

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## Daniel says

Stimpank western. Nije prvi put da naletim na ovaj svet (Wild Wild West anyone) ali je opet redak spoj da predstavlja vrlo interesantan koncept. Plus dodamo grim dark osećaj sa glavnim likom koja je prostitutka i dobijamo knjigu koja ima vrlo jedinstven glas.

Cela knjiga je naracija iz prvog lica, sem razgovora, i ceo svet gledamo iz samo jednog ugla i vidimo samo što Karen vidi. Generalno nisam fan takvog pisanja ali ovde je bilo dosta efektno pošto je Karen odličan narator i sve je prikazano tako da drži pažnju. činjenica da je prostitutka igra važnu ulogu ali nije uopšte u fokusu pošto za nju to je samo posao ko bilo koji i nema nikakvih teških emotivnih konotacija. Plus sama lično ne kaže šta je tačno to što radi neko koristi eufizme tipa gledanja u zvezde (iako je to malo teže kada si u kući :) ) ili šivenje pošto zvanična profesija bordela je krojačnica.

Priča je zabavna mada iskreno rećeno veći deo je i predvidivo ali drži pažnju i vuče dalje. Likovi koji su opisani su interesantni i pokriveno je dosta ... seksualnih orijentacija pošto imamo lezbejke, muškarce koji se oblače i ponašaju kao žene itd. Ali sve je prikazano kao normalno i organski tako da ništa nije štrčalo ko forsirano.

Sve u svemu zabavno štivo vredno pažnje.

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## Sunil says

*Karen Memory* grabbed me from the very first line: "You ain't gonna like what I have to tell you, but I'm gonna tell you anyway." Here was a character I already wanted to spend an entire book with if Elizabeth Bear could keep up that voice, that spunk, that verve. She does, making the first line of the book a lie: I *did* like what Karen had to tell me.

Karen Memery is a "seamstress" in Madame Damnable's bordello in Rapid City, which Bear describes as a combination of 19th century Seattle, San Francisco, and Vancouver (and the cover copy describes as the predecessor to the Seattle Underground, which is apt given the two levels of the city that require ladders to travel between). In the first chapter, we're introduced to the other members of this establishment, and it's just women, women, and more women, but better than that: black, Chinese, Indian, trans, disabled. A couple major male characters are black and Native American. It's refreshing to see such historical accuracy! Karen, as a white woman, isn't *super* racially aware, but she's naive and curious rather than racist, and I like how Bear makes that distinction, allowing her to make the occasional insensitive remark but not without her getting a talking-to. Also she's queer. It's like Diversity Bingo all up in here, but it all feels natural: these people have existed for all time and it's lovely to see them play major roles in stories like this.

The book wastes no time starting shit, as the legendary Merry Lee brings in Priya, a stargazer (I learned a lot of new euphemisms) rescued from the villainous Peter Bantle, who has a mechanical mind control glove (did I mention this book was steampunk?). Also streetwalkers are turning up murdered, which brings a Marshal to

town.

Here's the thing about this book: I don't care much about Westerns or steampunk and the book does not spend as much time on the elements of the story that personally excite me (mind control glove! murders!) as I wanted...and I still adored the crap out of it. Karen is an immensely likable narrator, and Bear's descriptions created a world I simply enjoyed reading about, whatever was happening in it.

Here's another thing about this book: Elizabeth Bear wrote an entire book about prostitutes without writing a single sex scene. Can you imagine this book as written by a man, all male gaze-y and shit?

*Karen Memory* has action, romance, intrigue, adventure, and a climax so ridiculous(ly wonderful) it has to be read to be believed. I can overlook any minor flaws because it's such a delight.

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## Stacy says

*Karen Memory* by Elizabeth Bear is a difficult book for me to review. If I took a deconstructionist perspective, then it would get a higher rating because there were things about the book that I enjoyed; however, I did not enjoy reading the book as a whole: it was downright burdensome, which is never enjoyable.

Things I enjoyed:

-I loved the theory of this book. The idea of reading about a brothel in a Seattle-like city fascinated me.

-The feminist intention; I can't really say it had a feminist "message", per se, but the intention to empower women, including prostitutes, was really intriguing.

-The diversity: Chinese, Indian, Native American, African American, transvestite, women, etc. It really had a well-rounded, diverse cast of characters, and I was grateful for that.

Things I disliked:

- The dialect. Karen tells the story in first-person POV, and she has a very unique voice. But Elizabeth Bear wavered at times when it came to the voice. Sometimes it was ridiculously strong, southern twang blaring. Then she would switch to a more eloquent voice. The shift was so clear that even the voice in my head changed, which had never happened before with the same character.

- The pacing. This book was a pacing nightmare! I struggled through it. I even considered DNFing it, but I just couldn't bring myself to do that. I know that authors work so hard on their craft; I can't bring myself to just quit on their effort half way through. Out of respect for authorship and writing, in general, I had to finish it. But I dreaded it ever time. The action would be rolling along (and it really does have some great action), but then Bear would stop mid-sequence to flashback to something, or give some sort of metacognitive insight. This was probably most apparent in the bar fight scene (this isn't really a spoiler, so no fear). In this scene a man is about to hit Karen with a bar stool. He has hoisted the stool above his head and is about to bring it down upon her, when out of the blue, Bear side-steps the action to flashback to Karen's dad and a horse, or some randomness. The movie in my mind was going bonkers: one minute I would be imagining

one scene, and just as I would be anticipating the next action, wham-o, tangential side-story barges in and messes everything up. And this happened a number of times. And it was ABSOLUTELY INFURIATING!!! The pacing was such an out-of-control roller coaster ride: all I wanted to do was get off and run far, far away. But I had to at least finish it. Honestly, I really did not want to pick up the book anymore - I resented it after a while.

- The convenient plot twists. I'm sorry: I know writing is hard work, and that making a plotline function is maddening, but one can't just make stuff conveniently appear for the character, or make the character endure totally impossible situations. And both of these things happened in this book many, MANY times!!! Sorry, but if your character gets burned, beaten, and bruised, she can't just run out there and fight another battle. Oh, and did I mention that she was a 16-year old, orphaned, prostitute! I had such a hard time imagining her as 16 years old. I kept seeing mid-20s, but nope; she is supposed to be 16! And yet, she can endure crazy abuse, come up with insane solutions, and almost single-handedly save Rapid City from complete decimation. And while she definitely struggled, things happened that seemed WAY too convenient: characters would magically appear or disappear just when she needed them. And, characters would break their normal personality so that she could survive and keep the story going. If the bad guy has Karen and knows that she is trying to get in his way, he'd dispose of her. Why would he want her to live? He is heartless and cruel; he has killed people before. Why would he all the sudden want to keep her alive? Totally not going to happen.

- The would of, could of, should of...ARRRGGGGG - a grammarian's nightmare. Yes, I know this is a totally nit-picky qualm (1st world problem, for sure). I mean, most people don't even realize that "would of" is incorrect, but it is, and Bear uses it incessantly, and it DROVE ME INSANE!!! I don't even see the point of it, really. Using the -of form didn't even match Karen's voice. If anything, Karen should have said "woulda, shoulda, coulda" instead of "would OF", etc. I get that she wouldn't have said "would have" because that is entirely too proper (even though she is actually an avid reader of dime novels, and a housemate of a uber-proper, grammar-correcting bar maid). But why "would of"? It doesn't even read correctly - "woulda" would have been so much better.

So I am torn with this book. The idea of it was brilliant, but the execution of it was off. And maybe it was just me: maybe other people will really love it, for it does have a few redeeming qualities. But for me it was torture. It took me almost a month to read this 350-page book. I can read more pages than that in less than a week, but this book took me forever! I never felt like reading it, and I even avoided it at times. That is not how I want to read a book. I want to love it, devour it, hug it close.

Read it if it sounds interesting to you, and let me know what you thought. Maybe I'm the weird one who just didn't get it. Maybe you will enjoy it more than I did.

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## **The Shayne-Train says**

Well hellfire and tarnation, was this a dang excellent read!

Ok, I'm sorry. It's so hard for me not to talk (or type, as it were) in a Wild West type of way after finishing a Wild West type of book. Especially when it's narrated in the first person, so every sentence and paragraph is filled with downhome wisdom and pioneer metaphors and good ol' fashioned grammatical errors.

So, this was amazing. Exactly as I expected from Elizabeth Bear, whose fantasy 'Eternal Sky' series (which

starts off with Range of Ghosts ) was so hauntingly beautiful as to almost redefine the entire genre for me. This book does the same with the 'Weird West/steampunk/alt-history' genre, as well.

So much is going on here. Adventure and derring-do, pimps and Indians, airships and submarines, evil plots, mind-control devices, transgendered whores, and about the sweetest lesbian relationship I've seen in literature. On paper, it could seem like too much, but Karen's heartfelt narration weaves all the very diverse strands into a beautiful tapestry.

I can't rate this book high enough, and with it Elizabeth Bear has officially entered my lauded list of "Best Authors Ever."

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### **Fiona says**

Finally, someone has managed to produce the steampunk novel that fulfills all the potential such a world has to offer! I love the aesthetics of steampunk, and the maker attitude that goes with it - but the fiction set in that world has almost always let me down. Not this time!

The almost-titular Karen Memory is an orphan who turned to seamstressing - and occasional sewing - to make a living in a world too busy to watch for all the fallen sparrows and soiled doves. She's smart and quick to fall in love; she's courageous beyond all reason and one hell of a horsewoman.

She's working as a seamstress at the Cherry Hotel run by Madam Damnable (if it isn't clear yet that's a "seamstress" with a nudge and a wink) when trouble literally lands on their doorstep. Far from the usual bickering atmosphere you see portrayed in this kind of establishment, these women are almost sisterly in their regard for each other. And as the trouble itself quickly grows in scale and scope, those bonds save them more than once, leading to some marvellous adventures with a souped-up sewing machine (and that's an actual sewing machine, no winks or nudges).

The adventure itself is enough to make this a good book, but the characters are what made it truly exceptional. Each one is individual, and finding that many were based - loosely, but based - on inspiring people from history was the cherry on the cake. They all had the chance for even a small moment of courage, and it is that spirit of courage and the true bonds of respect that shone through every page.

A great way to kick off 2018!

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### **Emma says**

This was a high adventure and a barrel of laughs! Karen Memory is a fantastic protagonist with a very authentic voice. An action filled western with lots of shoot outs and shenanigans. A wonderfully varied cast of characters, heroes and villains alike. A badass bunch of women saving the day.. surely this would do well on the big screen? Well worth a read!

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## Amanda says

After making it to page 90 something, I just couldn't go on. *Karen Memory* is a mixed bag of genres telling a story that's been told before: prostitutes with hearts of gold become targets of big, bad men in a frontier town. Now, I like a good western and I like good science fiction, and nothing makes me as giddy as when the two come together seamlessly (R.I.P. *Firefly*), but *Karen Memory* wasn't a particularly good western and it was only sci-fi by way of some very minimal steampunk elements (so tangential were such elements to the plot, in fact, one could read entire chapters and forget that such elements existed). Overall, the effect was underwhelming.

There were some good elements, primarily the diversity of the characters (which has been mentioned in several other reviews, and with good reason). Bear is to be applauded for creating a world that includes so many varying races and sexual identities, but ultimately many of the characters seemed one-dimensional to me--especially Karen Memory (her name is unnecessarily spelled with an "e" in the book itself). Karen is an inconsistent character throughout, primarily defined by the following: she speaks in a backwoods dialect that seems to come and go throughout the novel, she sure does wear out needless euphemisms for turning tricks, she sure does love her some horses, and, boy, howdy, she sure does love the Indian waif who ends up on the doorstep of Madam Damnable's house of ill repute. Two things in particular bother me about Karen. The first is that dialect does not an interesting character make; dialect should be a part of the character, but should not be the means by which a character is defined. Secondly, she falls in love with Priya (aforementioned Indian waif) the moment she sees her. Karen, based upon no real interaction with Priya, decides she's the toughest, prettiest, smartest person in the whole wide world. Few things are as maddening to me as the "love at first sight" plot device.

Maybe the book gets better and, as you can see from a sampling of the other reviews here on Goodreads, I'm in the minority. However, instead of spending more time with Karen, I think I'm just going to go re-watch Captain Mal and his band of misfits aboard the *Serenity* aim to misbehave.

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## Megan Baxter says

There are a lot of books that I have had rough relationships with the past little while. Those I struggled with partially liking, and partially being upset by. Books that didn't live up to their promise, and didn't surprise and amuse or challenge me. And then there's *Karen Memory*, which was so utterly delightful that I think I was only fifty pages in or so before I started telling people how much fun I was having reading this book.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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## Bob Milne says

By now you've probably read more than a few gushing, over-the-top, positive reviews of *Karen Memory*. I

got sucked in by the praise myself, to the point where I rather boldly harassed the local Chapters for not carrying a copy, but I'm pleased to declare the praise warranted.

Elizabeth Bear has crafted an unassuming sort of story that's equal parts science fiction, steampunk, alternate history, western, pulp adventure, romance, and thriller. Surely, it seems like it should be too much, like there should be too many things going on, but it all comes together in just the right proportions to make for a fun read that will have you turning pages late into the night.

It all begins and ends, of course, with Karen Memery (she spells her name with an 'e' in place of the 'o'), who serves as both protagonist and narrator. She has an incredibly distinct voice, all-but defining the story with her cadence, pacing, and word choices. She's unfailingly polite, and rather coy about her profession, but also honest about just what 'sewing' entails. Really, it's Karen who makes the story work so well, with so much of the drama, the tension, and the humor resting solely on her shoulders. In addition, it's Karen who keeps us grounded, and who provides such a down-to-earth sort of feeling for what is, at times, such an oddly fantastical tale.

Surrounding Karen is a solid cast of characters, comprised not just of the kind of strong, bold, brave women you'd expect to find in a frontier town, but also of a few good men - including a lawman who inspired legends of Lone Ranger, and his Comanche sidekick. Even more important to the story, however, is the villain - one Peter Bantle. It's incredible to have such loathing for a character of whom we see so little, but Bear does a fine job of driving home the physical, emotional, and psychological implications of his villainous acts. Even without his electrical mind-manipulation device, he epitomizes the concepts of scum and villainy. It's rare that I want to see a literary character dead with such passion, but he really gets under the skin.

If I were to have one minor issue with the book it would be the pacing. The first half is rather slowly paced, seemingly concerned as much with the telling as the tale, but then the action just explodes and we race towards a frantic climax. It's almost like two books in one, mashed together for the sake of convenience. The first half is a period piece, a romance, and a western, while the second brings the thriller and the steampunk elements to the forefront. It does get a bit silly with the pulp and steampunk elements - you have to see what Bear does with a massive sewing machine, and the homage to Captain Nemo is fantastic - but that's part of the fun. That's not to say I didn't enjoy both halves, but there is a distinct boundary in the text where we transition from one story to another.

I doubt there's much else I can say that's already been said before, and I'm conscious of spoiling some of the surprises, so I think I'll just leave it there. Karen Memory is a book crosses genres and pushes some boundaries, but it's Karen Memery's narration that really makes the tale. If you're at all curious, take my word for it, the hype is legitimate, so grab yourself a copy and settle in for a read.

*Originally reviewed at Beauty in Ruins*

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