



Fire Logic

Laurie J. Marks

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Earth * Air * Water * Fire

These elements have sustained the peaceful people of Shaftal for generations, with their subtle powers of healing, truth, joy, and intuition.

But now, Shaftal is dying.

The earth witch who ruled Shaftal is dead, leaving no heir. Shaftal's ruling house has been scattered by the invading Sainnites. The Shaftali have mobilized a guerrilla army against these marauders, but every year the cost of resistance grows, leaving Shaftal's fate in the hands of three people: Emil, scholar and reluctant warrior; Zanja, the sole survivor of a slaughtered tribe; and Karis the metalsmith, a half-blood giant whose earth powers can heal, but only when she can muster the strength to hold off her addiction to a deadly drug.

Separately, all they can do is watch as Shaftal falls from prosperity into lawlessness and famine. But if they can find a way to work together, they just may change the course of history.

Fire Logic Details

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From Reader Review Fire Logic for online ebook

Chris says

I both really enjoyed and yet was disappointed by this book at the same time. I liked the setting and admired the bold society she set in place, but at the same time parts of their culture was grating.

I think the main reason I was disappointed was that over the years I've really raised my standards regarding fantasy novels. I tend to only read weird-fiction fantasy these days, and I was expecting this to be a bit weirder -- the third book in the series is printed by Small Beer, Kelly Link's press, and until I picked up Fire Logic I didn't know that the series started out at Tor, a very mainstream fantasy press.

What I liked about the setting was the realistically poor and dirty medieval feel to the world. This is not a high-fantasy setting at all: there are no knights, no castles, no silk wearing nobility. The closest you get to a castle is a wooden fort on a hill, and the paladins spend the time between battles hand-sewing their torn clothes and oiling their rare and precious blades. Most people are peasants, even those forced to fight, and battles result in death, amputations and infected wounds. More fantasy needs this gritty realism.

I also liked the "clash of civilizations" the plot entails -- our heroes are insurgents fighting off a technologically superior invading force that believes it is bringing law and order to an oppressed, backwards society. But what starts as a "one-man's freedom fighter" model then begins to lend a bit of emotional depth to the invaders as well; however, instead of merely going to the easy end of "both sides are human," the book hints more at the evil of conflict and dualistic simplicity -- the struggle perpetuates violence and we need to look outside the simple modes of "good/evil" for a solution. A bit hippie "subvert the dominant paradigm," but basically well done.

The most notable and infamous aspect to Mark's world, however, is the complete fluidity of gender and sexual-orientation, with all the primary characters being queer. Some people have complained that it feels forced, but that's just a testament to how straight-oriented most of our reading experience is -- we read countless fantasy books where every relationship is straight, but that never feels "forced" or a "conceit." In Mark's world, families are sprawling, polygamous communities centered around community and child-rearing, whereas romance seems to be reserved for members of one's own sex. And why not? Readers of fantasy can accept almost any far-flung societal ideas, and yet the most alien society is still expected to have our hereto-centric relationship norms? And for the few who have called it "unbelievable", its not too far removed from the Roman idea of romantic love, especially among soldiers. Its also nice to see a book where women and men share roles in all aspects of society, from ruling to fighting to farming, without it being mentioned as unusual at all.

What grates a bit, however, is the whole "elemental" conceit. Certain, special individuals have magical abilities linked to the elements, and here the book gets a bit touchy-new-agey and somewhat stereotypical. Fire elementals are passionate, romantic, lacking in logic but strongly intuitive. Air elementals are highly logical, dispassionate to the point of cruel, but well-intentioned. Earth elementals are slow, solid, loyal in their friendship and linked to healing and plants. I'm still not sure what water elementals are, but you get the point. Here's where the "give peace a chance" themes can get a bit heavy-handed.

All in all, however, it was well done, just not well done enough to make me pick up the next three books in the series. As my standards for fantasy have gone up, my tolerance for the multi-book sagas (which are so prevalent in the genre) have gone down. Give me a good one-volume tale so I can move on to something

else. Few plots, characters, or worlds, deserve 1,200 pages; this isn't one of them.

Dan Clarke says

Fire Logic disappointed me, and not only because I found it difficult to connect to any of the characters on any meaningful level. The book had an interesting premise - a world at war, the rebels against the overbearing Empire (uh, sounds familiar, but it really was thought-out!), and even an interesting-if-overdone elemental division.

The writing was just not good enough to bring all of these elements together. It improved near the end of the book, but then fell off again for the denouement. This book was recommended to me as an example of a strong female protagonist - and there were elements of that in this book, not in the main protagonist but in the drug-addled secondary who becomes more prominent about two thirds of the way through the book. Even she seems defined by her flaws, however.

I hope for the sake of those who did enjoy this book (and I know they're out there) that it improves in its sequels (of which two of the three have been published, with the third apparently not on the horizon), but I won't be reading them myself.

Summer says

I was really excited about Fire Logic after reading the blurb but I just could not manage to get through it. It's one of those fantasy books that dumps you in the middle of a complex world and a group of characters and you are just supposed to pick it up as you go. Sometimes that can work and you don't necessarily want a giant info-dump at the beginning of a book. However for me sometimes it's just too difficult to muddle through confused and trying to understand why you should care about what's going on. Maybe someone else less distracted by this would get more out of this but I eventually gave up. Hmph.

Wealhtheow says

An excellent beginning to a really promising series. Several damaged women--the last survivor of a slaughtered tribe, a gifted blacksmith with a drug addiction, and their few friends--band together to fight against the invaders that have destroyed their lands. It's got wonderfully imaginative storytelling, complete with a really great new style of magic set in a believable yet fantastic world. However, what really drew me in were the characters.

B.R. Sanders says

NOTES ON DIVERSITY

Hey, are you looking for a diverse book? **MAYBE YOU SHOULD READ THIS ONE.**

Seriously. Zanja, one of the POV characters, is a lesbian woman of color who also experiences an extended period of disability.¹ Karis is half-giant and a smoke addict. Her addiction greatly impacts her functioning day in and day out. Emil is a soldier, and continues to be a soldier well into middle-age despite a consistent difficult knee injury. The lot of them are poor; living hand-to-mouth. Emil is classically educated, but many of them are not. And, so many of the characters are queer--and various flavors of queer.²

REVIEW:

When the leader of Shaftal dies without naming a successor, the country falls apart. The Sainnites take advantage of the power vacuum and slaughter the bulk of Shaftal's remaining leaders, throwing the country into chaos and war overnight. Zanja, a trader in training from the northern mountains, witnesses this and witnesses in the intervening fifteen years the havoc the war wreaks across the land of Shaftal. But she can do little about it until the war comes knocking at her tribe's door. It isn't until then, that her own tribe is threatened by the Sainnites, that the story really starts. Because then Zanja's fate becomes tied to Shaftal's.

This is a long and complex book. Zanja is not the only narrator--that paragraph is my paltry attempt to summarize the book without giving anything away, but it doesn't get into the depth of the book. Karis, the half-giant addict is also a narrator. So is Emil, the old paladin commander Zanja winds up befriending. And Medric, a young seer who holds the fate of both the Sainnites and the Shaftalese in his hands. It is a fantasy epic, but instead of kings and castles, it is an epic about farmsteads and ironworkers.

This is a wonderful, thoughtful book populated by wonderful, thoughtful characters. It could have been tighter, but that's ok with me. I don't mind a shaggy book. Your mileage may vary. The thing that most irked me about FIRE LOGIC--and this is a fairly minor point, though it is enough that I am willing to knock it down a star--is an unevenness in the worldbuilding. There was such a fine and deep eye towards some elements, things like the historical use of specific words like porringer and dray horse that lent the book an authenticity I loved. The elements of guerilla warfare were intricately drawn with almost too much detail. And yet I still have little sense of the magical mechanics of the world. It's stated that elementals are rare, but yet most of the characters I came to know over the course of the book are elementals. And if they are so rare, how are they handled? Would Karis really be left to be a blacksmith? Would Emil really simply be a paladin commander? Perhaps, this makes sense given the current state of disarray in Shaftal, but is there no specific training or guidance for people with these gifts? There was, at least, for Zanja among the Ashawala'i. It was because she was a fire elemental that she was first introduced to Shaftal as a trader, after all. Why are the elementals of Shaftal untrained? Or are they? It was a huge open question for me throughout the whole of the book given how prominent and important elemental magic turned out to be for the plot, and without some of these questions answered, the fire logic that drove the plot felt like contrivance more than once.

I also wanted to know more about the peculiarities of the elemental magic and how they impacted, specifically, the way these gifted people are perceived and embark into relationships with others. Yes, I understand that fire logic makes Zanja and Emil and Medric all very intuitive and prescient. All three of them seemed to be prone to fall in love awfully fast and awfully hard. Is this bad writing? Or is it a trick of the magic? I want to give Marks the benefit of the doubt here, but without some explanation, there is room to lean towards it seeming just like pat instalove. But then again, it could be that fire logic--that weird prescience, a kind of imprinting. I wanted more insight into how that works, if that was the case. How would Zanja or Emil's prescience work when turned towards a person instead of grand events? Could it be turned towards a person? Is that healthy?

Beyond all of that, it is Marks' handling of the way the big political shifts of Shaftal impact the formation of this found family that made the book really sing for me. Zanja and Emil and Karis and Norina and Medric

and J'Han are all broken, wounded people. They love each other, and they need each other, and they are better and stronger together--and that is, ultimately, what family is. Marks allows for a great deal of space and breathing room for these relationships to develop organically, for this little family to form on its own against all odds. And when it does, it is so emotionally gratifying.

Marks has a way of cutting to the heart of the desperate human need for connection, and it's this that propels the book forward:

"Annis talked to Zanja about her experiments with gunpowder and other unstable compounds. It seemed incredible that she had not injured herself when she clearly deserved to be blown to bits. In this community of huge, fantastically intermarried families, Zanja's loneliness was becoming intolerable. She experimented with touching Annis's arm, wondering if she herself would be blown to bits."

The characters' decisions are hinged on their relationships to each other. I was gripped by how they interacted, what they drew from each other, how they pushed and pulled each other. All of the characters, from Zanja down to the antagonists--the xenophobic Willis and the arrogant Mabin--are drawn with depth and clarity and motivation. Each is a joy to read. Norina hit me too close for comfort. Karis is a study in paradoxes. Zanja is the heart that holds the book together.

A book could not ask for a better heart than Zanja. I have rarely seen as fully realized a character as her, or as agentic a character as her. Or one with as much respect for those around her. I love what she tells someone at the end of the book:

"Scholars like Emil and Medric will study the obscure history of your life a hundred years from now and never quite make sense of it. So what, so long as it makes sense to you?"

1: Zanja's physical disabilities are magically healed, but the experience leaves her profoundly shaken. Her life changes absolutely because of her experience of having had a disability. FIRE LOGIC does not fall into the trap of either pretending that being magically cured wipes away forever the experience of ever having been disabled in the first place or that other people with disabilities exist in the world. Other characters with disabilities do continue to exist throughout the book, some of whom are healed, and some of whom are not.

2: In the case of one character in particular, Marks does a wonderful job depicting a fluid change in sexuality that is at once honest and heartrending and deeply emotionally gratifying.

Brianna Silva says

Okay. This is officially my favorite epic fantasy novel I've ever read.

My heart is sore - in the good way - after finishing it, and rather than try to write something structured and coherent, I present to you: A LIST* OF THINGS

(*actually multiple lists)

"♥?♥?♥???? Things"

- The main character is a **lesbian woman of color**. Liiike, how rare is it to have LoTR-type stories with protagonists that are female, queer, and dark-skinned??

- IT HAS A F/F ROMANCE THAT I SHIPPED SO HARD AND I DON'T SHIP SHIPS OFTEN AND IT MADE ME FEEL SO MANY THINGS
- Adventure! Battles! Characters that actually get seriously hurt quite a lot!
- Karis ? Who ever thought it was possible for me to feel such strong, aching compassion for someone who doesn't even exist?
- The world is entirely **egalitarian** and it's so pure and I didn't realize I much I wanted this. For people who think fantasy always has to be patriarchal... ugh! Read this for an example of egalitarian societies done right!
- Can we please just have a moment of silence for how **MOST OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS ARE QUEER**, and it's no big deal, and they never have to label themselves. They just are.

"Just ? Things"

- The world building didn't blow me away, but I liked it.
- It wasn't Medieval fantasy, but set in a slightly more advanced setting with swords *and* pistols. 'Twas refreshing.
- Main character was a tough, nuanced, well-rounded female warrior. The love interest tugged my heart and just made me care so much about her, ahh. None of the other characters really struck me, but I did enjoy all of them.
- I'm a sucker for themes of survival and friendship and rescues and doing-the-right-thing and ethical dilemmas etc. etc.

"?? Things"

- While I was fully entertained throughout the story, and never felt it had a dry or dull moment, the plot did seem to meander a little.
- It was such a diverse, intersectional story **AND YET WHAT IS THE ABOMINATION THAT IS THIS COVER. WHO WHITE-WASHED ZANJA. SHE IS DARK-SKINNED AND DARK-HAIRED. WHY. WHY.** *howls at the moon* *screams at white supremacy* I will never ever be okay with this.

Issue with cover design aside - which was also not the author's fault I'm sure - I loved this. And I will not soon forget it. ❤?

Julian says

Yes!! This was so good! I love when sf/fantasy truly breaks the mold and this book does it. I've never ever before read a fantasy novel in which the author posits a world with **NO** gender issues at all. None! Every character's job or main role in life is based on their personality and motivations, not their gender. It's not just a flip-flop either. There are army commanders of both genders, farmers of both genders, raising-kids-focused people of both genders, family structures of all kinds, queer and straight relationships are given equal importance, etc. There's plenty of conflict and oppression between cultures, but none on gender lines - the cultures just don't see it as an issue. The structure of magic power is also done completely differently than anything else I've seen. And she's a great writer and the characters come across excellently. So glad this is a series so I don't have to be done after this. AWESOME.

C Hellisen says

This is an elegantly, subtly written book about a people under occupation, and the magic that interweaves the

various factions.

I admit it took me a little while to get into the story because the earlier narrative feels a little stilted, with large elements being related in a way that felt almost flat and devoid of action, but I persisted, and a beautiful, fierce and tender story began to unfold for me. There were no simple answers to the problem of invasion and guerilla warfare. The enemy was evil, but also not, the resistance was good, but also not. The various factions and tribes were all working at cross-purposes to each other, though the thread of hope binds them all together. The work is complex and deals with its myriad human themes with a deft hand.

While the larger story of how the Shaftali will finally deal with the Sainnite invasion is not yet completed, to me it felt that Fire Logic could be read as a stand-alone, though it is book 1 in a series of 4. There is a completeness to this particular tale that doesn't leave the reader feeling frustrated that they've been left on a cliff-hanger. (A technique that always feels cheap to me.)

A point that definitely worked in the book's favour for me is how relationships between women and women and men and men are treated as normal and simply part of the narrative world with no explanation required.

So, fair warning, a very slowly unfolding story, but the final result is worth the effort.

Tamora Pierce says

I'm re-reading after some years away, and loving the book even more than I did the first time! Marks creates a realistic society in which women are the dominant sex. The home country has been conquered by an army with no home to return to, and its leaders have been fighting a long, guerilla war against them. What they need is the leader who is joined by her magic with the earth, but the one who inherited the office from the former leader is a drug addict and former prostitute who doesn't believe in her worth or her job. The second-in-command of the army is beginning to see that her people have to re-think what they are doing if they are to survive, as do some of the rebel leaders.

The characters are complex, facing complex problems. I not only love them and the world-building, but I was able to give this and EARTH LOGIC, which I also liked VERY much, to a gay friend who wanted a lesbian romance in which the fact that the women were gay was not an ISSUE, but simply part of the romance.

Definitely find EARTH LOGIC if you like this. Small Beer Press has published the third book, WATER LOGIC, which I will read as soon as I'm sure I'm ready for the next one. (Sometimes I overload on a universe if I read too many books in it one right after another.)

Chelsea says

Gritty elemental fantasy with a focus on interesting, well-developed female characters who happen to be queer? Sign me up, yo.

I knew Zanja would steal my heart, because the crux of her character is that she is a diplomat! A learner of languages, crosser of borders, and traveler to strange lands! That she is a warrior also doesn't seem to negate

this, which is neat considering that usually characters like her get slotted into pacifist roles, since they understand other people so well and all that.

Minor annoyances (and spoilers?): that, of course, the POC nation/tribe/whatever entirely kicked it, even if they were awesome while they lasted. And don't people fall in love, like, really fast in this universe? Being prescient probably helps with that, I guess. Also a bit confused about overall elemental prevalence in the population, though this might be cleared up later.

Good things: H/C done right, so right, with realistic pain and long recovery times. Addiction handled well also, which I admit I was nervous about at first... although the implication that now that they know people can recover, there will be no more people dying of opium (excuse me, smoke) is, er, naive at best.

John says

The Logic series (there are 2 more and someday a 4th) are an unusual read. They're more challenging than the usual fantasy fare, as the author is interested in war/conflict but considers the subject from a philosophical/anthropological viewpoint, focusing on cause and result with little interest in glory yet aiming still to be entertaining. The result is consistently surprising for a fantasy read, though challenge and surprise won't please every genre reader. The author is also interested in sex and gender roles and uses a construction of magic that may be a metaphor for personality analysis. These, too, are presented more as challenging thought-topics than as examples of plausible world-building; another challenge and surprise that not everyone will like. Still, for a change in pace I think the series is quite a breath of fresh air for the genre reader. Begin with reasonable expectations and you may find a serious discussion of topics that engage you.

Zoe's Human says

I wanted to like this *so* much. A female lead in an epic fantasy? Awesome! Elemental based magic in a war-torn country where the people struggle in a guerrilla war against the evil oppressors? Hell yes, I want some of that! What's that? An LGBT positive lead? YES! Go diversity! The actual book? Dull, dull, dull, dull, dull. I was more entertained when I washed up the dishes by myself earlier tonight. I was filled with dread at the notion of finishing the next 309 pages. This writer's style is just all no for me.

I DNFed this at page 50.

Lightreads says

I read this weeks ago, and for complicated reasons promised myself I would figure out how to review it before reviewing anything else, so at this point there is a ridiculous pile of books jostling behind this one, and none of them are even half as good, and I still don't know what to say.

It's a fantasy about a land overrun by foreign warlords, and elemental magic systems, and guerilla warfare, and it's not any of the things you are imagining right now because it is *so much* more. It is politically radical and personally harrowing. It is ornately but precisely written, and it is put together so well, it's one of those

books where story and theme are actually the same thing. The best way to describe it is that I had the strong impression that Marks grew this book on a vine instead of writing it. Which is what critics say when they mean "organic," but I'm using more words because I really mean it.

Basically, it's a beautiful, complicated piece of art, and I loved it.

Alice says

This is a terrific feminist fantasy series with primarily queer female characters. If that's up your alley, you will enjoy this. If it is not, you will not. I loved all three of these books and I am chomping at the bit for the last one to come out. Morally sophisticated fantasy with complex protagonists. I read a review of this book which said it depicts a world where women are the dominant gender; I don't think that's the case at all-- I think it depicts a world where people are not judged on their gender or sexuality. Perhaps that looks to some like female domination, but I just found it insanely refreshing after reading 100 books where the One True Warrior/God/Mage/Knight/Whatever is a plucky young man with humble beginnings and a sidekick who is just an older or uglier man. Marks fearlessly reimagines familial and sexual bonds and yet this is just in the background-- the main stories are your typical fantasy quests/battles, which is what I like about fantasy in the first place. Totally recommended.

Mel says

I am totally bored. There is a kingdom in upheaval and war and doom to come but I simply don't care.

I believe it's because of the distance to the characters in the narration. I don't care for them because I don't get to know them. I knew I was a reader who prefers character-driven novels but most of the time the narration isn't that detached from them.

Genre: high fantasy

Tags: lesbian

Rating: dnf, no star rating
